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READ MORE » **Never Jig a Crappie Jig**—Crappie guide Todd Huckabee is a master jig fisherman. Spring through fall, he and his clients usually catch their limits on jigs, but it's the jig moves, or lack thereof, that matter.

FISHING INSIGHTS » **Deep Bedded Bass**—For Texas pro Keith Combs, catching more bedded bass often means looking not just in out-of-the-way places, but also much deeper than you'd think.

PLUS! **MASTER ANGLER** » Enter your latest catch into our Master Angler program to receive awards and recognition inside this magazine and across our social media platforms. **BEST FISHING TIMES** » This FREE interactive Solunar Calendar offers the best fishing times based on your exact location. **RECIPES** » Experience new and unique ways to prepare and cook your favorite fish.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVES

Phoozy Thermal Protection » This device case protects your phone through a layered matrix of premium technical materials that strike an ideal balance between form and function, whether in the boat or on the ice.

Spring Walleye Tackle » A jig-and-minnow is often the name of the game for spring walleyes, but a faster presentation of pullin' baits that create more thump can elicit more strikes from aggressive fish.

Blackened Catfish » In true Louisiana fashion, use Tabasco to add some heat to the maque choux. A modification of a redfish recipe with Cajun succotash, this one won't take all day in the kitchen, but it's sure to raise eyebrows at the table.

ON THE COVER
Crankbait Bass!
BY LARRY TOPLE

COMING NEXT ISSUE » Going Full Berkley Bass; Lazy-Day River Smallmouths; Summer Peak Walleyes; Timber Muskies; Great Lakes Perch; Kayak Catfish; Extra-Long-Cast Rods; Boat Fires; and Much More!

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BY **DOUG STANGE** EDITOR IN CHIEF

A Little Piece of Paradise in the Wilderness Close to Home

A hint of sunrise sets the eastern sky as I shuffle down the bank to a river spot that has been a prominent part of the In-Fisherman scene since we built our office on the right bank of the Upper Mississippi River in Baxter, Minnesota in 1998.

It's a chilly morning in May, shortly after the official fishing opener the second Saturday of the month. When the water isn't too high, postspawn walleyes filtering back to feeding areas down river find their way into spots in this section of the river. How could we be so lucky that the land available on which to build our office would abut a river section with habitat characteristics that often attract fish—not just walleyes, but smallmouths, pike, and muskies, and more recently channel catfish?

There's a dam about 4 miles upriver. Just above us a prominent necked river bend quickly widens and settles into a long run and, at the end of that run—which is where our office sets—a basin of sorts, before the river again narrows and shallows up, flowing more quickly down river past several rocky outcrops that resemble wing dams, each with modest eddy areas below them.

At the tailout of the basin, the water builds, causing it to momentarily slow, especially along bottom. So, as I've noted, several weeks after spawning, walleyes are on the move downriver—and the little bit deeper and slower water in the basin gathers baitfish and some walleyes wanting to feed on them.

This day the river is low enough that I bumble along the water's edge in hip waders. My rod is a 7-foot medium-light power with a fast tip, the reel a 30-class something spooled with 8-pound braid, the better to make long casts—from shore, obviously, you're at the mercy of what you can reach from your casting position. In this instance, working the basin area from head to tailout there are three spots to fish, each about 60 feet apart, before the water gathers steam and quickly pushes south.

I've spent thousands of hours fishing like this from shore. You get to know good spots well. The basin, about 8 feet deep this day, has scattered rocks and a few large boulders set on a mostly sand and marl bottom. The walleyes are always in the basin—sometimes a bit upstream, often in the belly of it, and sometimes right at the tailout.

It's the nature of moving water to stack most of the wood debris closer to the bank in shallower water, which makes fishing through those areas more difficult. Apparently, there's not enough water over head to make baitfish feel safe up shallow in these conditions.

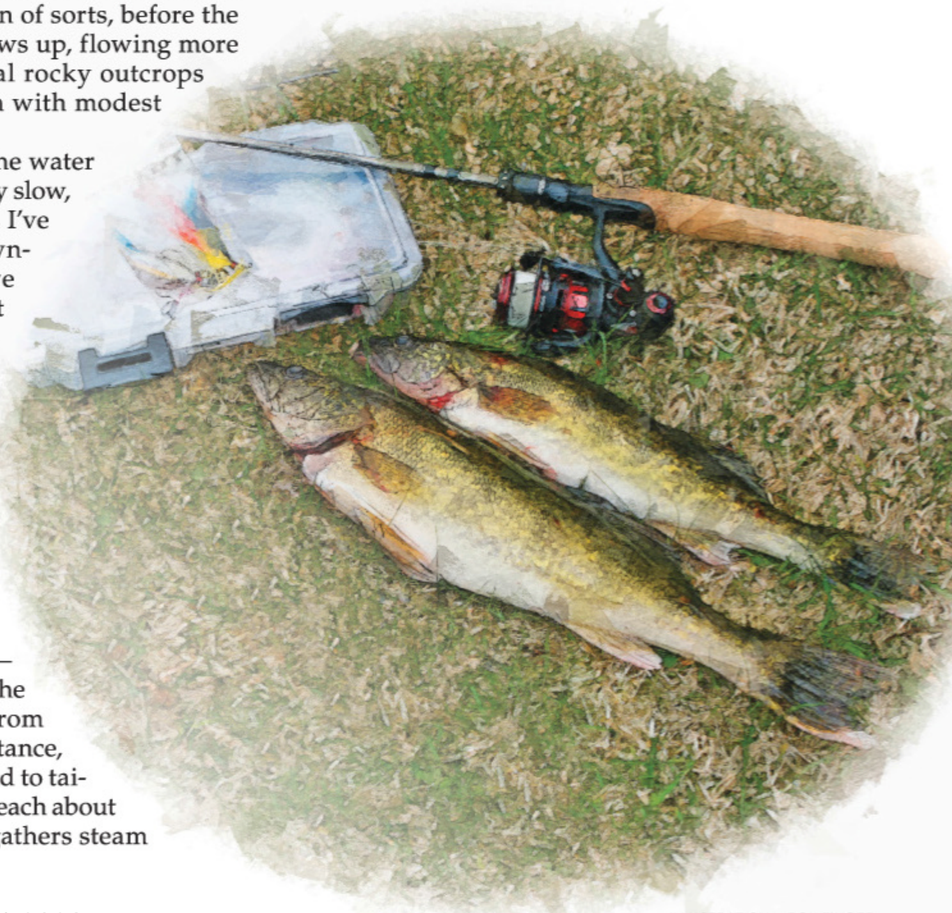


ILLUSTRATION // RON FINGER

Later, once the basin has been picked free of forage, occasional smallmouth bass cruise the shallows, looking for scattered baitfish and crayfish.

The curious thing about a spot like the basin is that most anglers walk right past it to fish the obvious boulder outcrops below the tailout. Boat anglers also head immediately to that classic-looking water with rocks and distinct eddies. Granted, in summer, smallmouths might be there. In another two weeks, a short-lived glut of prespawn channel cats might also be in the hole below the most downriver outcrop. It's all about timing and territory and the nature of fish being pursued played against the backdrop of river dynamics.

An aside, my largest muskie, about 52 inches and weighing an estimated 40 pounds, was in this basin during late fall when the water was low. The slower, deeper water in the tailout was again the perfect resting and feeding area for that fish. In fall it's redhorse and white suckers moving downriver that muskies are looking for. That big fish was 20 years ago, though. These days, muskies don't seem to hold there anymore. That, too, is part of the changing nature of various river areas. Yet overall, this river section is 35.1 miles long and still produces some big fish. They just aren't in all the obvious areas of yesteryear.

Boots, rod and reel, small plastic bag of lures, hat and hooded jacket. Up the bank is a knife, a brain spike, and an *ike jime* wire. It also works to carry a fish basket to keep fish alive until you cleaned them, but these days, it's Catch. Kill. Bleed. Chill—that is, catch as quickly as possible, kill immediately with the spike to the brain, then bleed immediately and use the wire to destroy the spinal cord. This reduces any stress on the fish, which ensures the best possible outcome at the table.

In warm weather, ice is required to chill the fish, but on this cool morning, given that I won't be fishing long, I just lay the fish in grass until it's time to leave. Make no mistake, my intent is to catch at least one for the table.

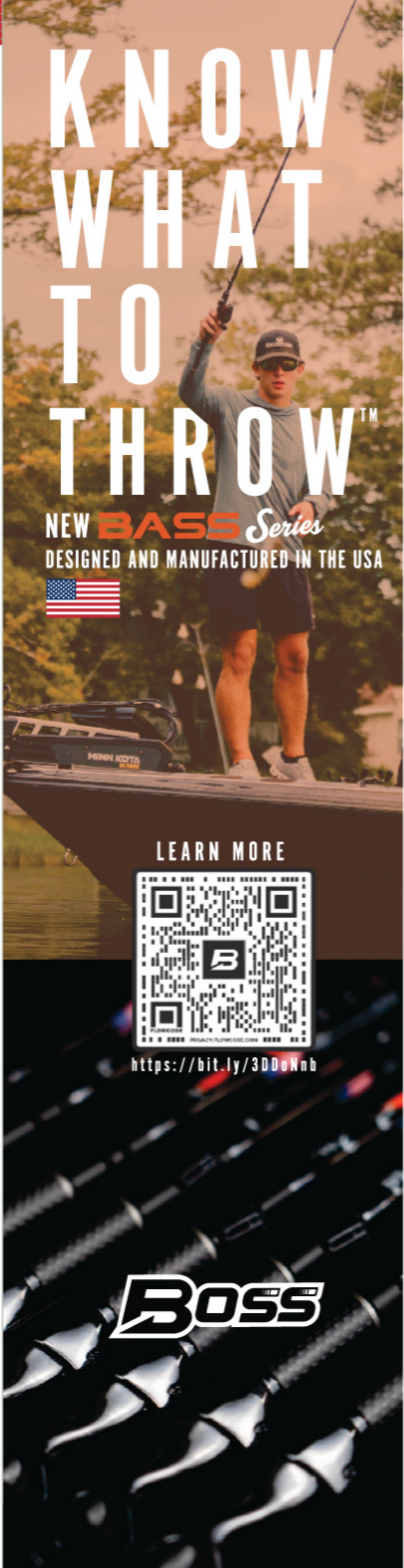
Just about anything that works for walleyes triggers fish in this instance so long as you can get it near bottom and keep it there. The obvious answer is a jig. Hair jigs work superbly, tied in just about any minnow pattern. The other answer is a plain jighead with a paddletail body about 3.5 inches long. Successful fishing is firstly all about depth control and then speed control, or how you're working the lure. Shape and color and other lure characteristic are secondary to the fact, which is true in every angling situation. It's a simple lifelong angling axiom that should always be riding in your hip pocket.

In this instance, a slow grind along the bottom works best. The casts can be at a quarter upstream, straight across, or at a quarter downstream. Once the lure works through the deeper water—so about 40 feet of a 100-foot cast—just reel in quickly and make another cast.

An hour of this—maybe two—is just right, because that's what it takes to catch the fish that might be here. Then give it a rest until tomorrow. Fresh fish should trade in and set up to meet me again in the morning.

Fish can be caught midday at times on dark days. The most important thing is to have fish moving through. Which is why it's not a worry to reveal spots like this. Conditions conducive to attracting fish don't happen every year, and even when they do the fishing rarely last two weeks. Besides, other shore anglers can't get here. Boat anglers, meanwhile, have their pick of a dozen other potential spots that are just as good; no need to travel all the way to this particular basin to have a chance at catching a couple fish.

Each time a fish hits and I stand connected I also stand amazed. Before leaving, time for a cup of coffee, watching the river roll on down toward Louisiana, as I sit at an old picnic table near a fire pit where I have cooked many shore-lunches over the years. I am often in search of simplicity these days, and this is it. A little piece of paradise in the wilderness close to home. ■



ADVENTURES

OTISCO LAKE MARIETTA, NEW YORK

Tiger Muskies » This 2,000-acre lake is perhaps the best place in the eastern United States to catch numbers and have consistent shots at trophy-size hybrid muskies, after the opener on June 1. There also are stellar populations of smallmouths, largemouths, walleyes, and various panfish.

Contact: Captain Kurt Hoefig, 908/442-3656, khoefig32 on Instagram.

Kade Gewanter

FORT PECK RESERVOIR FORT PECK, MONTANA

Walleyes, Pike, and Lake Trout » Truly a great option for big fish of all three species, now with handier access to the fishing, fishing information, and lodging. King salmon and channel catfish, too.

Contact: Eddie Mindt, Lake Ridge Lodge and Bait Shop, 406/526-3597.

Jason Mitchell & In-Fisherman

FORT COBB RESERVOIR

LAWTON, OKLAHOMA

Saugeyes » Actually, solid fishing for both walleyes and saugeyes also exists on Lake Lawtonka, Lake Ellsworth, Waurika Lake, and Lake Altus-Lugert, all a bit southwest of Oklahoma City. Eaters can be plentiful, but there are big fish surpassing 8 pounds, too.

Contact: Guide Curt Wilkerson, 580/35-8110, *curtsguideservice.com.*

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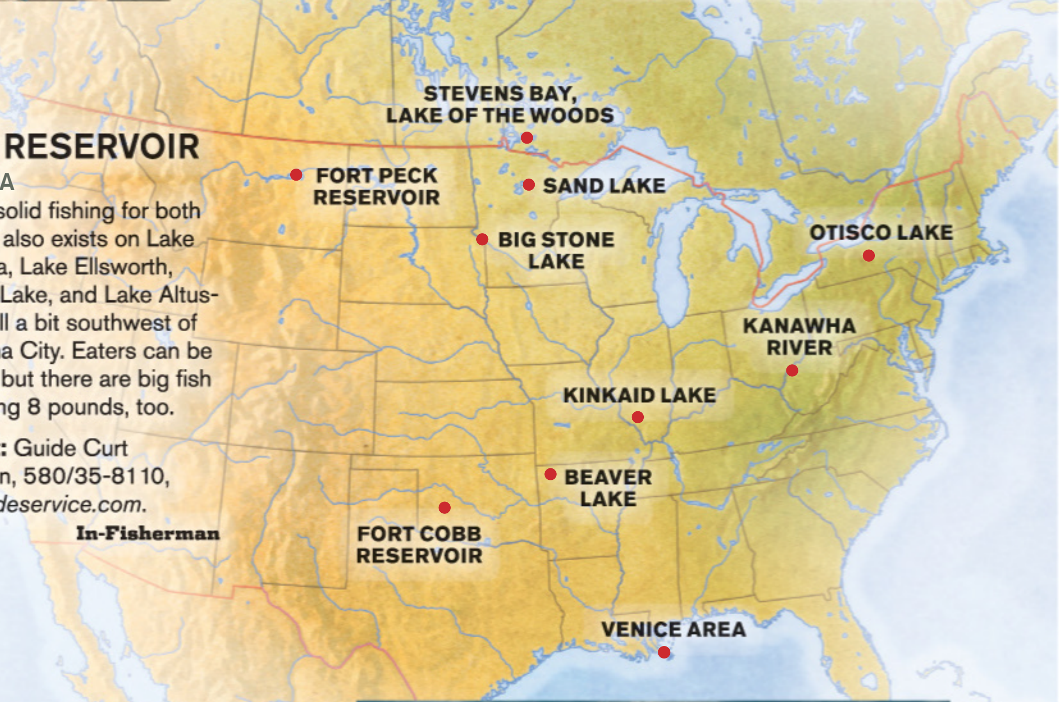


VENICE AREA LOUISIANA

Redfish » Spectacular fishing for redfish that may surpass 30 pounds, plus speckled trout and a variety of other species, all year long, but the fishing just gets better as the season rolls on. Options for offshore fishing, too.

Contact: Native Adventures, 504/534-2570, *nativeadventuresllc.com.*

John Hoyer

PHOTO // MOORE MEDIA

Feature Travel Tips from In-Fisherman Staff & Friends

KANAWHA RIVER PT. PLEASANT, WEST VIRGINIA

Flathead Catfish » The lower stretch of the Kanawha River, where it empties into the Ohio River, produces impressive numbers of flatheads in the 20- to 50-pound class, as a result of protective regulations that safeguard against commercial fishing and the live sale of trophy fish to pay lakes.

Contact: Capt. Tabitha Linville, 304/972-5803, Catfish Duo Guide Service on Facebook.

Steve Ryan

STEVENS BAY, LAKE OF THE WOODS NESTOR FALLS, ONTARIO

Muskies » Young's Wilderness Camp is set on an island in this beautiful section of the million-acre lake. The water here warms quickly, providing solid early-season angling for muskies that might top 50 inches, after the opener in late June. Walleyes, pike, smallmouths, and crappies also abound.

Contact: Young's Wilderness Camp, 807/484-2930, *youngswildernesscamp.com.*

In-Fisherman

BEAVER LAKE

ROGERS, ARKANSAS

Stripers » For those wanting action from fish ranging from 10 to 30 pounds, and sometimes bigger, this is the place to be, fishing with one of the best striper guides in North America.

Contact: Capt. Mike Bailey, 479/366-8664, *beaversafari.com.*

Doug Stange

BIG STONE LAKE

ORTONVILLE, MINNESOTA

Walleyes and Largemouth Bass » A lake with no closed season long known for its walleye fishing also produces largemouth bass to 6-plus pounds, along with solid options for perch, bluegills, and crappies.

Contact: Capt. Ryan Kelly, 651/769-3142, *fishlagoona.com*; Capt. Erik Brandriet, 605/880-2485, *dpangling.com.*

Doug Stange

KINKAID LAKE

MURPHYSBORO, ILLINOIS

Crappies » Lake of Egypt and Rend Lake are also in play, these reservoirs to the southeast of St. Louis, each hosting scads of fast-growing crappies, many running 2 to more than 3 pounds.

Contact: Guide Kyle Schoenherr, 618/314-2967, *allseasoncrappies.com.*

Matt Straw

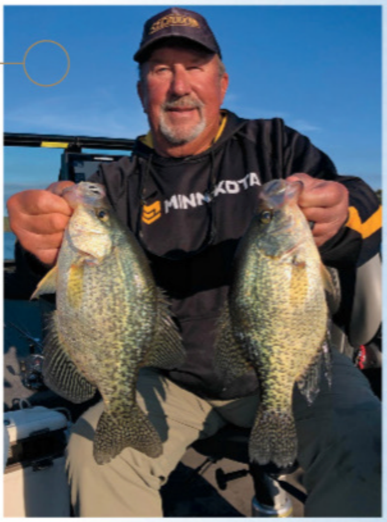
SAND LAKE

DEER RIVER, MINNESOTA

Multispecies » Abundant walleyes and crappies plus beefy largemouth bass are top draws on this lake, part of the Bowstring Chain, and a short cast from Lake Winnibigoshish, collectively offering over 70,000 acres of prime fishing.

Contact: Guide Tom Neustrom, 218/327-2312, *mnfishingconnections.com*; Guide Jeff Sundin, 218/245-9858, *jeffsundin.com*; Lakewood Lodge, 218/659-2839, *lakewoodlodge.com.* ■

Dan Johnson



STAFF Noteworthy & New

New and Unique Fishing Stuff, as Reviewed by the In-Fisherman Staff

Zenon
MG-LTX

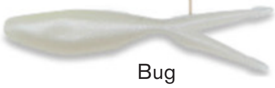
Zenon MG-LTX

Beautiful to look at, and because it weighs just 4.6 ounces, a thing of beauty to hold in hand, the **Abu Garcia Zenon MG-LTX** offers top-of-the-line features, including a new SLC spool design with hybrid ceramic bearings, resulting in the smoothest possible performance. Check many more unique design features—$549.95, **abugarcia.com**

Bondy Panfish

Soft bodies for panfish, the **Bondy Sweet Pea** and **Bondy Bug** can be rigged on small jigheads or drop-shot rigged, Sweet Pea measuring 1.5 inches and the Bug 1.75 inches. Bug is available in 40 colors, while the Pea is offered in 4—$6.99 (package of 20), **bondyfishing.com**

Sweet Pea

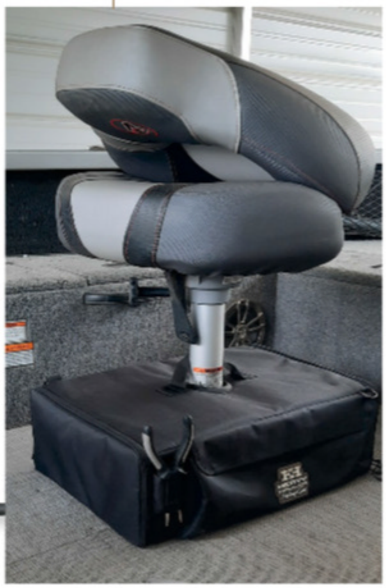

Bug

Quick Silver

Exceptional for trout and salmon (and walleyes and pike), the newly re-introduced **Williams Quick Silver** is offered in two sizes, 1/3 ounce (3 inches) and 3/5 ounce (4 inches), and 12 colors, including copper. The spoons are famous for their precious-metal finishes, including 24-carat gold and jewelry-quality silver, plus a holographic decal topside that adds even more flash to this dancing, fluttering package—check pricing at **williams.ca**

Handy Tackle Storage

Heavy Hauler Gear Boxes put into use the space under pedestal boat seats, creating a compartment of heavy-duty 600D polyester fabric with a rigid foam interior. The Medium Gear Box holds eight 3600-size 11-inch trays, while the Large Gear Box holds six 3700-size 14-inch trays. A carry handle and shoulder strap make this a "go anywhere" bag—$49.99 to $59.99 (no trays), $119.99 to $129.99 (with trays), **heavyhaulerfishinggear.com**



Trika Terrific

Independent lab testing is said to show the proprietary weave design in **Trika** spinning and casting rods to be twice as sensitive as high-end competitive rods costing up to $700. The design also is lighter and produces longer casts. Five spinning rods range from a 6-foot 6-inch light medium-fast to a 7-foot 6-inch medium-fast. Seven rods in the casting lineup range from a 6-foot 10-inch medium extra-fast to a 7-foot 7-inch extra-heavy medium-fast—$349.99, **trika.com**

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SHAPING

Crankbaits are the most variable lure category in both form and function. Match a plastic or wooden shape with a bill and pull it through the water, and all kinds of magic can happen. Or not.

Lure bodies vary widely, the product of the overactive imaginations of garage whittlers and CAD machine operators alike. They're made to run shallow, deep, and in-between, thanks to their size, weight distribution, construction, and perhaps most importantly, their bill. It's the action they produce when pulled that determines how bass react.

Water's Way

The reason crankbaits move in so many ways lies in the nature of water. This miraculous substance is the most common one on planet Earth and is essential to life as we know it. It's also the only substance to exist naturally in three states–solid, liquid, and gas.

Although it seems soft to the touch, it carries incredible force as we all recognize after being banged and bounced around on a stormy lake. That's because its pyramid-shape three-molecule makeup (two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom) and associated hydrogen bonds cause it to adhere to other water molecules, a characteristic called "hydrophilic" (from Greek words for water and love). It's the reason drops slowly form, sometimes turning into icicles, and why waterbugs can skate across its surface.

Its resistance to movement through it has caused fish species to evolve in shapes intended to facilitate swimming. And the same resistance make cranks do their wiggles, wobbles, rolls, and more. It increases as water cools until it turns to ice. Water's nature is responsible for the tiny variances in crankbaits—that one magic lure of a dozen apparently identical ones that seems to always get bit.

Bait Selection

The name Kevin VanDam often arises when crankbaits are discussed, due to his unparalleled success over 30 years of tournament fishing, as well as his design input in several of Strike King's best sellers, including the KVD 1.5 squarebill and deep-diving 6XD, 10XD, and more. He worked with the late Phil Marks on many designs. "Strike King has recently added a new engineer to the team," VanDam reports. "Shane Fettis worked at Quantum and joined the team after its acquisition by Rather Outdoors. He's been involved in our most recent crankbait introductions."

Along the way, VanDam has used many of these baits for big wins. When selecting the best one for the job, he's pretty open-minded, noting that patterns vary greatly depending on location and associated weather patterns. "In early spring, I use flat baits a lot, but also try square bills and small divers that root around hard cover.

"It depends on the mood of the bass, which is related to water temperature, preyfish abundance, and their position in the water column. Buoyant flat-sided cranks can be the ticket during the heat of summer when bass get around cypress trees or in fallen trees along the bank. They can't resist a bait bumping branches over their head, particularly in darker water."

Ott's Garage

Ott DeFoe is one of the most accomplished of today's professional anglers, winner of the 2019 Bassmaster Classic and now a regular top finisher on the MLF Bass Pro Tour. He's a versatile angler, but finds his niche with a crankbait rod in hand. That's not surprising, given his East Tennessee roots, where many popular crankbait styles were envisioned by anglers skilled with a scroll saw and X-Acto Knife.

"During my early years in high school, I started to make baits," DeFoe says. "I was taught by Steve

Ott's Garage

»Rapala pro staffer Ott DeFoe worked with company executives and engineers to build a new series of balsa baits, designed like the homemade models from his home area in East Tennessee.

Tiny 4
Slim 6
Rocco 5

UP for SPRING CRANKING

BY STEVE QUINN*

Nichols, the father of my fishing buddy Jason Nichols. He cut out lure profiles from balsa with a scroll saw, then carved them into shape with a knife and sandpaper, rounding the edges. Balsa was the favorite wood for luremakers, though some used basswood as well. Balsa is so easy to shape and its buoyancy helps create a great lure action.

"A balsa lure shape weighs next to nothing, so the key is proper weighting to achieve easy casting as well the action and depth you're looking for. Later I began using a router for shaping lure bodies, which quickened the process considerably.

»Kevin VanDam has helped design several top-selling baits for Strike King, based on his decades of experience fishing hardbaits.

»East Tennessee bass ace Ott DeFoe began carving crankbaits during his high-school years, leading to his successful Ott's Garage Series for Rapala. Note the Humminbird 360 sonar on the bow he uses to find key cranking spots.

PHOTO // RAPALA

"It was easier to make flat-sided baits, so that was the dominant style," DeFoe says. "Steve Nichols used bills made of Lexan, though most guys used circuit-board material, called 'chip lips.' When you build baits, you learn that the line-tie position and the bill angle are very important, in addition to proper weighting. Those factors are most important in determining action. Then the bill shape comes into play, but it's not as critical. You can put a square lip on a round-lipped fat bait, and it's action isn't that different.

"I won the 2011 All Star Tournament on the Alabama River and Lake Jordan using my homemade baits," he says. "The water was cold and flat baits worked better than anything." Later that year, DeFoe's tournament success encouraged famed balsa baitmaker Rapala to bring him onto the pro staff. "Vice President of Marketing Matt Jensen called me and asked if I'd be interested in joining Rapala to represent their hardbaits and I was eager to join the staff," he says.

"Until 2019, that's what I did—promoting their great line of baits like the classic Shad Rap and popular DT Series, among others. To stay ahead in the fishing industry, though, new products drive excitement and sales. I'd had the idea for a line of 'OG' baits (Ott's Garage) for several years and we discussed it in 2017. Two years later, we decided to go ahead.

"Our first was OG Slim, a 1/2-ounce balsa flat bait that excels in cold water of early spring and also in fall; all winter long in reservoirs in southern latitudes," DeFoe says. "It has a medium wobble and tight side-to-side action. Its circuit-board lip is thin and light and slightly flexible, with the eye just above the lip, which gives it great action and helps it deflect off cover. They eat it great down into the mid-40°F range.

"Next came the OG Tiny 4, a finesse-style flat bait with a short, rounded bill that produces a tight wobble. The combination of body shape and circuit-board lip create a shivering action that seems to suit the aggression level of cold-water bass.

"Rocco 5 is the latest, a round-body bait with a square circuit-board lip that gives it a rolling action," he says. "It's gotten rave reviews from anglers across the country and I hear sales are great. The OG models come with VMC Hybrid Trebles with a little beak to their point. Bass rarely get off when hooked on them."

I asked DeFoe if these new baits have replaced the Shad Rap, perhaps the all-time favorite coldwater bass bait, in his arsenal for those conditions. "Not at all," he replied. "Bass show preferences for different lures on certain days and in certain situations. I still use the #5 and #6 Shad Raps a lot; they're always on deck for cold conditions."

Technology's Role

As with so many aspects of fishing, technology advances have changed the way lures are made, as well as the way we fish. CAD machines and 3D printers have revolutionized lure production, allowing designers to make a workable prototype in hours instead of weeks or months.

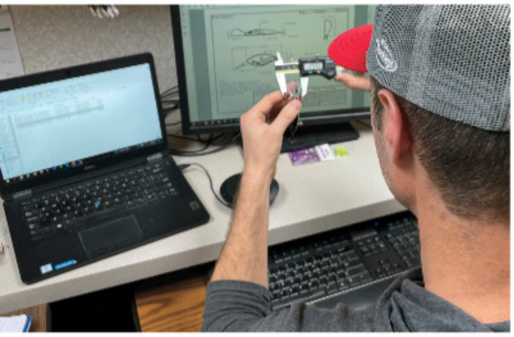
Dan Spengler, Berkley's Senior Engineer for Baits and Terminal Tackle, has spent 12 years developing hardbaits. "The huge popularity of the Flicker Shad, which came out around 2000, spurred us to do more with crankbaits," he says. "We added crankbait legend David Fritts to our design team in 2015. He's worked on a line of popular medium and deep divers as well as other styles.

"His Frittside flat bait came out in 2019 and has been a huge hit in the bass market, highlighted by Bobby Lane's win at the 2022 Redcrest MLF Championship on Grand Lake in March, as he caught most of his fish on it. We've just released a new version that produces a subtle clicking sound, called the Click'n Frittside. A metal rattle proved too heavy for its delicate balance, so we used a ceramic one, which produces subtle low-pitch tones.

"To create baits, a 3D printer has been invaluable in turning drawings into prototypes," Spengler continues. "Illustrations are digitized and the machine makes an exact model. The material differs from a finished bait but it gives us a chance to evaluate action in a flow tank, where it's again analyzed digitally, so we can break down its movement characteristics—roll, pitch, sway, yaw, heave, and surge.

"We put the 3D printer through its paces in producing our new gem, the Money Badger. It's a unique bait that's been in the works for several years. We went through 31 prototypes when trying to achieve the correct pull point for it. There are five sizes of Money Badger and each one had to be designed individually; merely upsized or downsized versions don't run right, due to the way the lure moves in water. This lure has design features of several of the most successful crankbaits rolled into one," he says.

»Berkley's Dan Spengler holds the 19th prototype of the Money Badger, hot off the 3D printer.



»He measures a prototype Money Badger and compares it to a CAD drawing. The 6.75 size required 31 prototypes to get final approval. PHOTOS // BERKLEY

VanDam notes a similar process at Strike King where 3D printers also are used for prototyping. "Create a schematic and the printer produces it. It's a great starting point, compared to the way we had to have molds made years ago. Crankbaits are the most difficult lures to get right, due to all the ways they move. In comparison, it's easy to design jigs and spinnerbaits with that machine."

In addition to production, technology has added new pages to the way anglers use crankbaits, most notably with sonar systems that clearly depict bottom structure and indicate fish 60 or more feet from the boat. DeFoe has been using Humminbird's 360 units since they first

Berkley Money Badger

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13 Fishing Jabber Jaw

Bagley B

Storm Arashi Square 3

›Be Square

came out about 10 years ago. "It was a revelation back then and today's Mega version is so much clearer and with longer range," DeFoe says.

"I use it to scout bottom features around the boat. It clearly shows rock ridges, high spots, pockets, logs, and more. If I see an object at 10 o'clock that's 40 feet away, I make a cast to bring a crankbait into contact with it. I match its depth to my chosen lure to make contact, which often generates a strike. You know when you hit it with a crankbait; it's much harder to feel an object with a worm or other bottom bait. For me, 360 is more useful than forward-facing sonar."

VanDam, in contrast, has become a convert to forward-facing sonar, with a Humminbird Mega Live on his bow, rigged with TargetLock to point the transducer independent of the trolling motor's direction. "Once you have the Mega Live transducer set at the correct angle, you can watch a crankbait swim back to you and see if bass are following it," he says. "I recall an early-spring tournament at Smith Lake in Alabama where I saw numbers of spotted bass shadowing my 3XD. By watching them, I was able to change my retrieve to a stop-and-go to trigger bites.

"The unit shows that lots of bass casually react to lures or ignore them. But at times you can change retrieves to get them to snap. Weighting crankbaits to slowly rise can turn chasers into biters as well. If a lure floats up too fast, they lose interest. I clip a small weight to the front treble hook or place an adhesive weight on the body just in front of that hook. I've learned a lot about how bass react to lures with Mega Live."

More Lure Options

VanDam reports that Fettis recently designed the flat-sided Chick Magnet, a plastic version of a bait made by crankbait ace Andy Morgan. It won the Best of Show at the 2022 ICAST Show in the hardbait category and has become a great seller, particularly around the Tennessee River reservoirs where coldwater cranking is a way of life.

"His latest design is the Hybrid Hunter, which is in a category all its own," VanDam says. "It has an L-shape bill that gives it a low dive angle and a wide wobble so it deflects off vegetation better than squarebills or rattlebaits. It's deadly in spring for working over big flats of hydrilla, milfoil, or other vegetation—areas where rattlebaits have ruled.

Strike King Hybrid Hunter

›Flat Baits

Bomber Deep Flat A

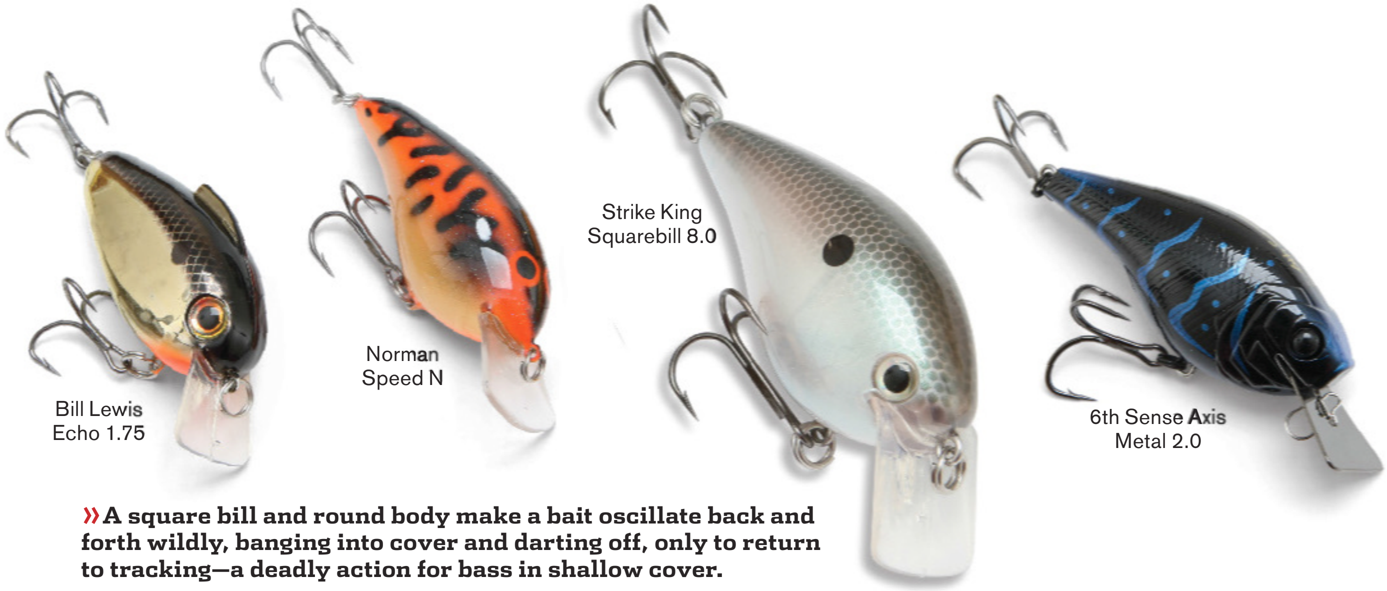
Berkley Clickin' Frittside

Strike King Chick Magnet

»In the chilly waters of early spring, anglers have long relied on flat-sided baits that exhibit a subtle shivering action that often matches the mood of bass shaking off the winter blues.

"East Texas tournament ace Todd Castledine helped with its design, ensuring it would work great in those conditions. Its buoyancy helps it work through thick grass, but it also works over shallow rock in darker water." Ray Hanselman, another top pro from East Texas, used it to take third last spring at the 2022 Bassmaster Elite event on Florida's Harris Chain, running it over grassy flats.

As Berkley's Spengler suggested, the new Clickin' Frittside promises to be another great springtime option, as bass at times seem to show a preference for rattling baits over quieter



» A square bill and round body make a bait oscillate back and forth wildly, banging into cover and darting off, only to return to tracking—a deadly action for bass in shallow cover.

versions with the same action. Water color, cover type, weather, and fishing pressure can all play a part in this choice. "It's a good addition," he says, "but the Money Badger will be one for the ages.

"When we first tested the Money Badger, it outperformed our wildest hopes. On our springtime test on West Okoboji Lake near the office, the water was just 40°F. We experimented with jerkbaits and finesse jigs with poor results. Casting Money Badgers, three of us caught 120 largemouth and smallmouth bass in the next six hours. The key was to reel it fast, then pause the retrieve for 10 to 15 seconds. When you went to start retrieving again, they were on it. Since then it's proved deadly when cast or trolled for walleyes, too. And guys trolling crappies have great success with the smaller models."

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» The author with a spring bass that fell for a squarebill.

Two new squarebill models have succeeded in making a bait with a movable metal lip that serves to create a clicking sound, while increasing the lures' hunting action. 6th Sense came out with the Axis Metal 2.0, while 13 Fishing added the Jabber Jaw at about the same time. 6th Sense owner Casey Sobczak says the 1/2-ounce Axis Metal 2.0 bridges a gap between bladed jigs and squarebills. "We designed it to have a wild hunting action, which we call Erratic Hunting Action (EHA)," he says. "We have a patent pending on our pivoting lip that allows it to run true while randomly hunting back and forth. It's unique for its sound and vibration." Jabber Jaw is similar, slightly shorter and heavier at 9/16 ounce. Its oscillating steel lip is embedded in the body.

The venerable Norman line has a new addition, Speed N, built with the same body as the famous Deep Little N, but with a square lip set just below the line tie to produce a tight wobble, but with an aggressive pitch and roll to wake up spring bass.

If you're like me, you have many boxes of different styles of crankbaits that run from one to more than 20 feet. This season, it looks like we'll have to fill a couple more with these additions that bring new twists, turns, and wobbles to the crankbait game. ■

**In-Fisherman* Field Editor Steve Quinn is a bass authority and former senior editor at In-Fisherman. He has been inducted into both the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame and National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame.

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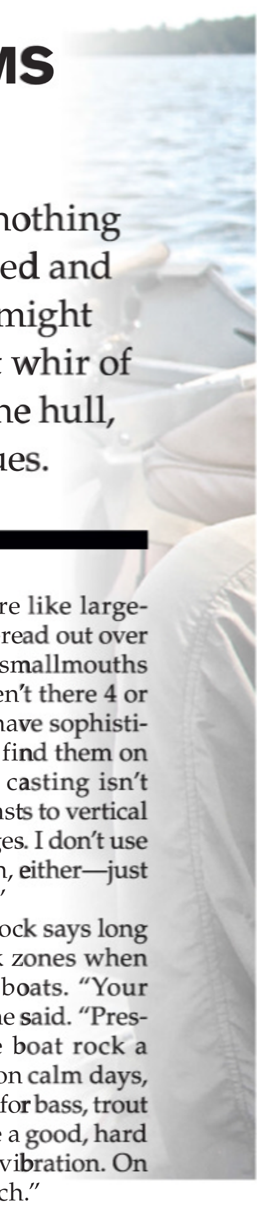

► A "spook zone" surrounds your boat. Has nothing to do with poltergeists. It describes an area that pressured and exposed smallmouths vacate when you drop by. Bass might be driven off by pings from depthfinders, the discordant whir of a trolling motor, the "clunk" of a thermos dropped on the hull, your profile, shadows, or any number of negative cues.

Anything bass felt, heard, or saw just prior to the last time they were hooked combine to create the spook zone. "Bass can learn to avoid capture and that's solidly established," says Dr. Hal Schramm, fishery scientist and fellow field editor for In-Fisherman. "A Mississippi State study systematically used 11 different types of lures during weekly outings on several ponds. Very few bass were caught multiple times. If bass learned to avoid a lure, they could have been caught on other lures. Possibly some other stimulus associated with angling, maybe the sound of the trolling motor, the presence of the boat, the sounds of anglers, or some another foreign stimulus in their environment, is what bass associated with being hooked."

Whether heavily pressured or not, bass in dense cover like weeds, rushes, pads, or tangles of wood have a smaller spook zone than bass with only gravel or rocks to hide in. Smallmouths, typically displaying a preference for the latter, tend to give wider berth to boats in pressured environments. But, having fished in many unpressured environments, I've seen lakes and rivers where smallmouths follow hooked bass to the boat and stay there in the shadow of the hull, where we could catch them, sometimes for an hour or more, by vertically jigging. And bass of all species tend to have smaller spook zones in cloudy water, but immense spook zones in crystal-clear water. Where spook zones expand, long casts increase odds for hooking up. But what rods, actions, powers, and lengths promote the longest casts for smallmouths?

Roger Bullock, a retired postal official, who also spent years supervising in the fishing departments of retail stores, has fished all over the continent with all kinds of rods for every imaginable species of fish. He now lives in Oregon and prefers really long rods for trout and mid-length rods for smallmouths. "On smallmouth waters here, I target rocks," he said. "Rainbow trout are roamers and that roaming helps them. Smallmouths are like largemouths. They aren't spread out over a large area. We have smallmouths in reservoirs that weren't there 4 or 5 years ago. We don't have sophisticated pressured fish. I find them on structure where long casting isn't needed. I make short casts to vertical structure like rock ledges. I don't use fluorocarbon for stealth, either—just for abrasion resistance."

On calm days, Bullock says long casts can create spook zones when fishing from smaller boats. "Your body rocks the boat," he said. "Pressure waves make the boat rock a bit. That's a big factor on calm days, whether you're fishing for bass, trout or anything else. Make a good, hard cast and they feel that vibration. On a rough day, not so much."

Calm or rough, skinny water demands a catapult—especially in clear water. "Long casting is the biggest thing for shallow smallmouths," says B.A.S.S. Elite Series pro Seth Feider. "You can't get too close to smallmouths in less than 5 feet of water. And on rock, gravel, or sand,

ST

BY **MATT STRAW***

»Often pursuing smallmouths requiring long casts with light, finesse presentations, *In-Fisherman* Field Editor Matt Straw has for decades been experimenting with rods, reels, and lines to refine his ideal long-cast system.

it's crucial to stretch that casting distance out there."

Watch that backcast. No ripping your partner's ears off. Lay the rod back. Eyes forward to line up the target. Stance like a discus thrower. Roll weight to the back foot. Snap the rod forward while transferring weight to the forward foot. Stop the rod, pointing in the direction of the cast, hopefully up toward the tree tops, so line is pulled straight, gliding through the guides.

Bullock says you don't need to shift weight, but he's talking about steelhead rods 9 feet or longer. "These longer rods require two-handed casting," he says "Pull backward on the lower part of the rod grip with your off hand as you whip the rod forward with your casting hand. This style of 'cross-over' casting is easy to learn. You don't have to throw your body weight into the cast. The upper part of your casting arm should move very little while the forearms deliver power to

Select Long-Cast Reels

Shimano Stradic FL reels have a Long Stroke Spool that creates a "smoother line lay," reducing line conflict translating into longer casts. Pflueger Patriarch reels have spools and spool lips constructed with "advanced materials" resulting in a slick, smooth release of line matched with lightweight handling and incredible durability. Daiwa Tatula spinning reels are one of the lightest on the market. Daiwa developed long-cast spools long ago and built that capability into every spinning reel since. The 2500 and 25 sizes are optimum in terms of a spool-size that releases light line with fewer guide-slapping coils. That size also balances well with almost all light- to medium-power spinning rods.

Daiwa Tatula
Pflueger Patriarch
Shimano Stradic
QC750

the cast. Steelhead anglers cast this way all the time."

Well, I fish steelhead with 12-foot float rods which can put baits in orbit. A one-hand back-handed flip can take a float rig all the way across bigger rivers in the Great Lakes region. But there is never really a need for rods over 8 feet long in the smallmouth realm.

Nothing sweeter than the faint "tic" at the end of a long cast, and the sight a heavy bass—like a speck—leaving the water somewhere across a county line. The right stick combined with the right line sets light-wire hooks way out there.

It's not just about the spook zone. It's about covering water. No matter what the conditions are, in most environments smallmouths inhabit, it can pay dividends to launch things into other time zones. Some rods catapult casts farther than others with the same energy applied. Some lines provide 10, 20—even 50 additional feet of distance.

Catapults

Ultimately, what part does length play in long-cast situations for smallmouth bass? "Length can be a big factor when casting lures, especially lighter lures," says Gregg Thorne, co-owner of Elliott Rods with brother Paul, and a master rod designer. "A longer rod in the correct power and action with the right momentum applied can generate rod load and torque for a long cast. Could it be accomplished with a shorter rod in skilled hands? Maybe. However, the longer rod pays out its dividends in picking up more line on long-distance hook-sets and plays out larger fish on lighter pound-test line with greater ease. I've watched skilled angers manhandle 4- to 6-pound bass on 4-pound mono with a long rod at boat side like they were using a flipping stick with braided line."

So what lengths are we talking about for making extremely long casts in smallmouth country? Most of the lures are 3 to 5 inches long and weigh 1/16 to 3/8 ounce. For ultimate distance casting with light line, I swear by 7.5- to 8-foot rods. For lures weighing 1/16- to 1/8-ounce specifically, the Elliott Rods ES79L-F, designed by Thorne, and the St. Croix Avid AVS80MLM2, designed by Mike Thorson—now with Batson Enterprises—provide vast enjoyment in capability, execution, feel, and long-cast ability. Apparently, I'm on to something.

"Fish the same braid on 9.5-foot and 7.5-foot spinning rods and there's not that big of a difference as far as distance is concerned," Thorson said. "A little bit, but not worth the hassle. A 7.5-foot rod is about as good as it gets when discussing long distance for smallmouths and the lure sizes and weights attenuating that discussion. But if we're talking float 'n' fly rods, absolutely go longer. Otherwise, it's just more guides equating to more friction for most tactics. You're going to gain a little tiny bit for a lot of hassle. Longer blanks and long casts really demand braid. The farther out you get, hook-setting is compromised and braid helps with that."

Bullock uses Berkley Nanofil. "The thinner diameter allows much longer casts, and the low stretch ensures firm hook-sets," he said. "I once measured a cast of 70 yards on a football field on a windless day. The added sensitivity allows you to distinguish between a light bite and a blade of grass. I use a Palomar knot with doubled line, like a perfection loop, tied to a small swivel for attaching. And another little trick protects ceramic tip guides. You don't want to reel the swivel up there. Before tying on the swivel, run a small, clear bead onto the braid and run one lap of line through it to hold it ahead of the swivel. I get more bites and lose fewer lures around rocks

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»Gregg Thorne and brother Paul have been designing and building high-performance fishing rods for four decades.

with an 8-pound mono or fluorocarbon leader 4 feet long.”

That 70-yard cast was made with a trout rod over 9 feet long. “For smallmouths I use a 7.5-foot rod,” Bullock said. “I use it for better accuracy, not distance. A new rod just came out—the 7.5-foot Fenwick moderate-fast taper HMG HMG-PX76L-MFS2 rated for 1/6- to 3/8-ounce lures. I use 8-pound, and can’t use Nanofil fishing tight to rocks for smallmouths. It frays too easy on rocks. I use Sufix 832 Braid on a 2500 Shimano Stradic.”

I’ve been on the local high-school football field, too, and measured casts from the goal line to the opposite 10-yard line with an Elliott Rods 7.75-foot light-power stick, using 4-pound Berkley FireLine. I did have some wind at my back, however.

Feider likes that 7.5-foot length on smallmouth water as much for distance as accuracy. “I made the top 10 on the St. Lawrence primarily fishing Ned rigs, sometimes at a pretty fair distance,” he said. “The rod I use is really popular—a 7.5-foot Daiwa Tatula Elite TAEL761MLMFS-AGS that I helped design. I pair it with a Daiwa Tatula Elite 4000 spinning real spooled with Sufix Nano Braid and an 8- to 10-pound fluoro leader.”

Thorson says rods longer than 7.5 feet create various problems. “They don’t fit in the rod storage,” he said. “And it’s incredibly expensive to ship anything over 8 feet. We made some telescopic 9-footers that compress to 7-foot 1-inch—crankbait rods primarily. Some guys like to pitch swimbaits on that 9-footer and it’s plenty strong.”

I have two 8.5-foot telescoping rods from St. Croix that compress to about 6.5 feet. No longer available, they were designed for slip-bobber fishing. We use them for bobber-wacky techniques—perfect tools for launching those unwieldy rigs a long way. (Like the most effective float ‘n’ fly rigs in water under 15 feet deep, the float is sometimes fixed on the line 7 feet or more from the bait—impossible to throw with shorter rods.)

When do we switch from spinning to casting to get better distance? “When lures get heavy enough to carry their own mass without needing maximum velocity to achieve great distances,” Thorne said. “Like casting a Reef Hog muskie lure, with minimal effort you can cast it into the next county. It has enough weight to carry its own mass. Try casting a cotton ball and it won’t go very far. More mass than weight.

“Designing a distance casting rod, our factors would be Length + Rod Action + Momentum + Material Recovery Speed = Distance,” Thorne said. “If one of the factors isn’t correctly applied, distance is negatively affected. Let’s start with length. In its simplest form a rod is a lever. The shorter it is the faster you can move the rod tip from the start of the casting stroke to the release of the lure. Speed translates to velocity and velocity can translate to distance, but a short rod has limitations. Rod ‘action’ means how it bends. It can be a parabolic action, moderate action, mod-fast, fast, or extra-fast. Rod action affects the degree of torque that builds in the rod blank on the forward stroke of the cast. Momentum relates to how much physical push you apply to the cast. Material recovery speed means how quickly the bend and torque created during the cast can recover to its original straight shape. The faster the recovery speed the greater the lure velocity.”

Materials

“Material recovery is greatly affected by how stiff the material is,” Thorne said. “Graphite stiffness is measured by its modulus or ton age designation. The higher the number the thinner and stiffer the fiber is. Thin and stiff fibers are brittle. Most affordable tubular graphite rod blanks are constructed using 24 to 40 ton fibers. Sometimes 50 ton can be applied in the butt section on faster action rods where little flex occurs.”

So, what fibers are best for generating greater distance on the cast? “Graphite fibers are optimum, but I can’t say which modulus is better than the other,” he says. “It all depends on rod action, length, and lure weight plus accumulating factors like how physically light and sensitive the rod needs to be. Plus, durability and cost, etc.”

General Guidelines

Matching Lure Weight to Rod Power & Action

LURE WEIGHT	ROD POWER	ROD ACTION
1/16- to 3/32-ounce	Ultralight to Light-Power	Moderate to Extra-Fast Action
3/32- to 1/8-ounce	Light to Medium-Light Power	Moderate to Fast Action
3/16- to 1/4-ounce	Medium-Light Power	Moderate to Fast Action
5/16- to 3/8-ounce	Medium-Light to Medium Power	Moderate to Extra-Fast Action
1/2-ounce	Medium to Medium-Heavy Power	Fast to Extra-Fast Action
3/4-ounce	Medium-Heavy to Heavy Power	Fast Action

Most anglers think their rod is made with carbon fibers of the same modulus tip-to-butt. Sometimes—but that's not always how long-distance rods are arranged. "When smallmouths follow baitfish out in open water, people are finding them with forward-facing sonar," Thorson said. "That 7.5-foot length is going to throw as far as that sonar can reach, if the graphite is blended correctly. Can't have a fast-action tip to cast that far—you need a slightly slower tip.

"High-modulus graphite is fast. Our long-distance designs have high-modulus graphite in the butt for hook-setting power and lower-modulus graphite in the tip for increased action. High-modulus gets brittle near the tip. We need to blend materials for the greatest distance. The lower modulus near the tip helps launch lures out there, transferring power from butt to tip evenly. There's a fine line there. If you came to me and said you just want to throw this one lure, I could design a rod to do that perfectly, but there would be a diminishing return with other lures."

Thorson designs blanks for Batson Enterprises, which only sells to other manufactures, so don't look for Batson rods. "Thorne Brothers (no longer owned by Gregg Thorne and brother Paul) buys our medium-light 7.5-foot blanks because that combination has become much more popular in recent years," Thorson said. "Another popular blank right now is a 9-foot 2-inch telescopic rated for 8- to 14-pound lines for 1/4- to 5/8-ounce lures. If you want to throw lures in that range long distance, this is the rod."

If you find a 9-foot 2-inch telescoping spinning rod out there, Batson made it. It will fit in the rod locker and cast hair jigs a mile on light braid, but odds increase for taking your partner's ear off. With every rod, there's give-and-take. ■

**In-Fisherman* Field Editor Matt Straw, a National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame inductee, has been penning *In-Fisherman* articles since the 1980s, about everything that swims in freshwater, but with particular clarity relative to smallmouths and steelhead.

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»Minnesota guide Brian Brosdahl's "stealth rig" takes standard drop-shotting a step further, adding a dropper line to extend the distance of the hook from the mainline. He's been experimenting with variations of modified stealth rigs for walleyes.

STEALTH FOR WALLEYES

►Drop-shotting generally hasn't caught on in a big way for walleyes, although some anglers have been playing with versions of it for years, dating back to angling innovator Bill Binkelman in the early 1970s, and his coverage of the concept in his book *Catching Walleyes*. Many waters are clearer today—Clean Water Act, zebra mussels—and fish are pressured everywhere. Thus, drop-shotting is a practical and productive way to put more 'eyes in the boat when other methods fail. Add forward-facing sonar and other electronics into the mix and the system is tough to beat.

RIGGING

MODIFICATIONS MAKING DROP-SHOTTING MORE DEADLY ON WALLEYES

BY **JIM EDLUND***

One prominent angler to adopt drop-shotting early on was Brian "Bro" Brosdahl. He's spent years experimenting and has tweaked the rigging to make it more deadly.

"I started tinkering with drop-shots—including a modified 'stealth rig'—almost 30 years ago," he says. "The stealth rig is a drop-shot rig with a short dropper line coming off of the straight drop-shot leader. When we first started using it nobody knew what we were doing; it looked like we were pitching jigs. But we typically were drop-shotting a leech or redtail chub. When the water's warm, redtails are really effective. Just pitch one out and work it slowly back to the boat. A leech is hard to beat throughout the calendar, though."

He says guides love using stealth rigging because clients can't mess it up. With the dropper off the leader, fish have just enough line to more easily suck in the bait.

Gearing Up

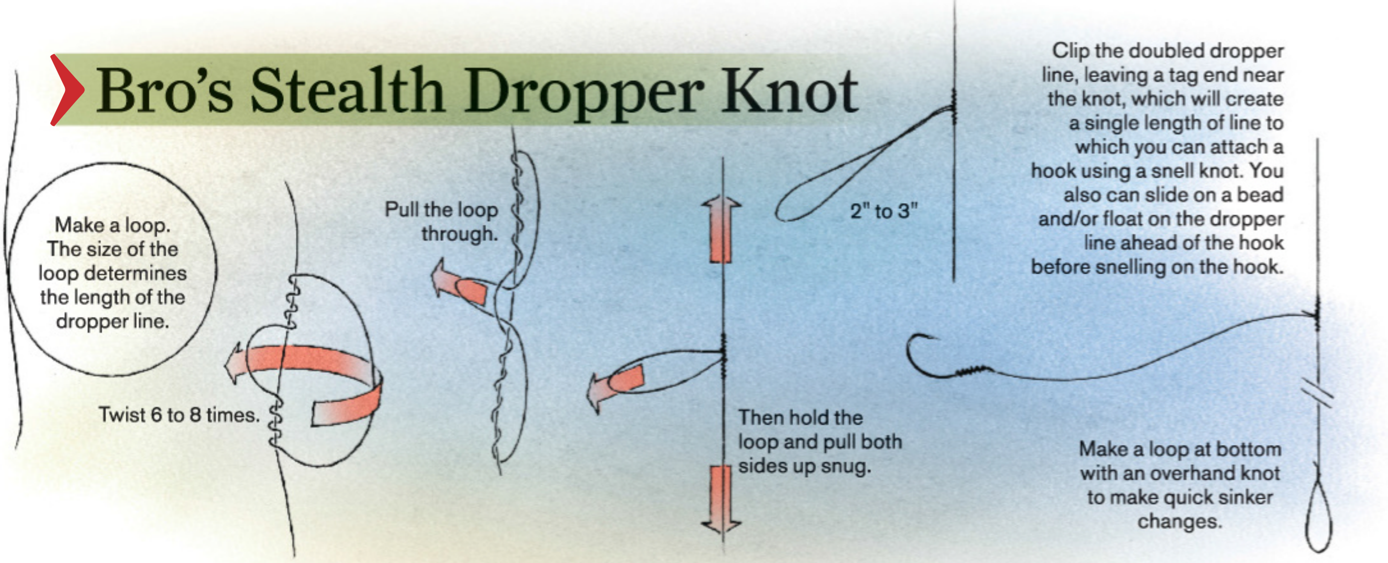
"Each day I have multiple rods set up with stealth rigs for clients. One has a Northland Tackle Gum-Drop Floater, another has a pill float, and another has a red #4 Gamakatsu Walleye Octopus hook with a red bead. The bead gives the fish a focal point to see it better. Double beads work, too.

"I use a loop knot and tie the rig so there's a line coming off the mainline. I run 8- to 14-pound fluorocarbon, using the heavier line if pike are a factor. Cinch the knot and clip one side and snell the hook on the tag. Tie it long enough and you can add a bead and snell the hook. Snelled hooks hang straight but sometimes it's best to use stouter leader material."

At times he uses standard drop-shot rigging without the dropper line and ties a Palomar drop-shot knot to secure a bright Gamakatsu Walleye Octopus hook. He also uses Aberdeen-style hooks, which get the bait out a bit farther, again so fish have a slightly easier time getting the bait in their mouth.

He also drop-shots with the Gamakatsu G-Finesse Swivel Shot Drop Shot hook and G-Finesse Swivel Shot Worm hook. "With a Gamakatsu G-Finesse Worm Hook you can pitch it out, work it along a breakline, and your 'crawler spins adding attraction," he says. "The hooks are super sticky, with a swivel connecting to your mainline, and a crimp on the bottom end to insert the dropper line to the sinker. Use a long enough leader so you can adjust the weight placement for the depth you want the bait off bottom. I pre-cut leaders with different sinker weights and have them ready to go." The Gamakatsu G-Finesse Swivel Shot Worm Hook, which was designed for drop-shotting soft plastics for bass, works

Bro's Stealth Dropper Knot



Make a loop. The size of the loop determines the length of the dropper line.

Twist 6 to 8 times.

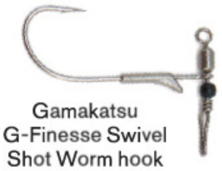
Pull the loop through.

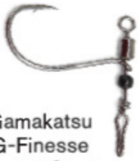
Then hold the loop and pull both sides up snug.

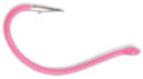
Clip the doubled dropper line, leaving a tag end near the knot, which will create a single length of line to which you can attach a hook using a snell knot. You also can slide on a bead and/or float on the dropper line ahead of the hook before snelling on the hook.

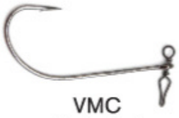
Make a loop at bottom with an overhand knot to make quick sinker changes.

Some Steath-Rig Hooks


Gamakatsu G-Finesse Swivel Shot Worm hook


Gamakatsu G-Finesse Swivel Shot Octopus hook


Gamakatsu Split Shot/Drop Shot hook


VMC Spinshot Neko hook

well with livebait, too. With the little barb, livebait stays pinned. "The hook works with plastics, but typically clients are more confident with livebait," he says.

As noted, many waters have become clearer, so we often can't fish like we did decades ago, hovering over fish and dropping baits straight down on them. These days, walleyes move away from the boat. On a stealth rig, a single bead or a pair of 5- or 7-mm red beads and a smaller #6 or #8 hook works wonders away from the boat and with spooky fish."

Walleyes also aren't always close to the bottom. In fact they're almost always up and cruising, according to Brosdahl. "On a lake with shallow flats like Leech Lake they might cruise 6 feet down in 8 feet of water and stay at the same depth when they move over deeper water," he says.

"Logically, try to set your drop-shot bait at the level of the fish. Granted, they often rise up a foot or two to grab a bait. Walleyes drop down, too; if they didn't, half the people who jig-fish wouldn't catch anything. Still, forward-facing sonar shows that walleyes are roaming a lot away from structure and cruising in middepths more than we used to understand.

"Sometimes you can use a larger hook and the fish don't care. Other times you have to downsize. Using a bead attractor you only need a smaller leech. Rigs and jigs can't compare. Leech Lake is an interesting example of drop-shotting, where I often use a big creek chub on a drop-shot moving through the big boulder piles. Plus-sized 'eyes just go crazy."

Whether he's on Leech, Cass, Winnie, or other Walker, Minnesota-area lakes, he drag baits along the shallow weededge, with his bait up above bottom-hugging chara weeds and zebra mussels.

Softbaits, Sinkers & More

Brosdahl uses a variety of softbaits. On rivers he fishes split-tail fluke-style plastics like the Northland Impulse Smelt Minnow. On lakes, paddletails, flukes, leech imitators, curlytail grubs, and smaller worms all work at times.

He uses a range of shot weights—even heavy shot at times, typically lead as opposed to tungsten because of the higher cost of tungsten. "On waters like Leech Lake you get snagged no matter what drop-shot sinkers you use," he says. "Often I use several of the heaviest split-shot from Water Gremlin. If shot comes off, just crimp on another one or two.

"Sometimes I tie a loop knot if I'm using a sinker with a pinch point. I put the loop through the sinker and loop around the sinker again for a secure hold. Push the line back through to change sinker weights and styles. You can also tie an overhand knot and run the line through the pinch point on a lot of drop-shot sinkers and the knot helps keep the weight on.

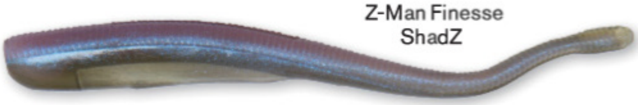
"Especially in rocks, using two big shot works just as well as any drop-shot weight, and they're cheap. But I like tungsten cylinder sinkers for their small profile and they transmit bottom composition well, and cast nicely in the wind. When you pitch tungsten weights out, they look like they're going to tangle but usually stay perfect."

He usually starts with a 1/4-ounce weight and sizes up to 3/8-ounce if it's windy. Around weedgrowth he uses low-profile tungsten cylindrical weights or a tungsten bullet sinker rigged upside down with a bead on each side of the weight to perhaps make a little noise. And, as mentioned, on rocky bottoms, he uses the largest Water Gremlin split-shot.

Stealth-Rig Softbaits

Berkley Gulp! Minnow

Z-Man Trick ShotZ


Z-Man Finesse ShadZ

Northland Impulse Smelt Minnow

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"Ultimately, you want to fish as light as possible and still maintain bottom contact to put your bait in the zone," he says. "Let the rig sink, hold the rod tip at 10 o'clock, shake, reel a revolution or two, shake, reel, repeat."

He likes a St. Croix Legend Elite 7-foot 6-inch medium-power extra-fast action for most applications, coupled with a Daiwa Tatula LT 2500. To go a step lighter he uses a Legend Elite 6-foot 6-inch medium-light extra-fast, coupled with the same Daiwa LT 2000 reel.

Ten-pound Sunline SX1 round green braid gets the call for both sensitivity and casting distance. "I like high-vis, too," he says. "I tie up mono for some of my clients—Sunline 8-pound Supernatural—because you can tie the loop knot for the stealth rig right into the mainline and you don't need a swivel. I use fluoro for my own dropper rigs for both invisibility and abrasion resistance."

Stories

Brosdahl: "I remember a tournament on Leech Lake that the late Paul Nelson and I fished. We made passes through good spots with rigs and jigs and blanked. Then I noticed on my Humminbirds that the fish were a little higher up off the bottom so I put on a 10-foot dropper

Attractants & More

Many pros and guides use various attractants to add appeal to their baits. And when it comes to walleyes, Brosdahl is no exception. "I've found that when drop-shotting softbaits, squirting them with Pro-Cure Trophy Walleye Super-Gel can make a big difference. I think the fish are attracted to the bait and they just hold onto it longer for solid hook-sets. Look at the track record that Berkley has with Gulp!, PowerBait, and MaxScent. Those baits have won countless bass and walleye tournaments, especially the new MaxScent baits," he says.

AIM/NWT pro angler Tom Huynh is another believer in attractants, frequently smearing Smelly Jelly Bass Feast on his baits. And anglers across the Walleye Belt have been reporting success on the Liquid Willowcat-designed goby, hellgrammite, leech, and willowcat-shaped soft-plastics, dousing the baits in the company's Liquid Willowcat and Liquid Leech attractants. Also, Berkley's MaxScent baits continue to sell in volumes to walleye anglers. Pro-Cure Trophy Walleye Gel is also popular and has been used by Brosdahl for years. It's also popular with anglers chasing giant walleyes on the Columbia River. Now, with forward-facing sonar on the scene, Bait Pop Live Sonar Intensifier is just starting to catch on; it's a scent/formulation that's said to both attract fish and make your bait and line show up better on the screen. For more on attractants, see *In-Fisherman* Field Editor Dr. Hal Schramm's article in this issue.

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and immediately got a bite. We kept drop-shotting and I caught a 29-incher. We didn't win but we did well. I think there is more anglers can do with drop-shotting by increasing dropper length from the traditional 1.5 to 3 feet.

"Every place I've been—fishing the FLW and NWT tournaments and tournaments in Canada—I've noticed walleyes suspending. Using the Aqua-Vu underwater camera was the first time I noticed this. And on Humminbird Side imaging you can see the shadows and see that the fish aren't anywhere near the bottom. Now, with Humminbird Mega Live I see walleyes aren't down in the weeds, they're above them. They're hard to catch because your jig is buried in the bottom and they're up above.

"With forward-facing sonar we're going to discover a lot of inventive ways to catch walleyes, because they're all over the place. Whenever they settle down, they're not always belly to the bottom, but

Huynh on Drop-Shotting

Tom Huynh and partner Nate Wolske have won many tournaments over the past two years, and part of their arsenal is the drop-shot.

"My setup is simple," Huynh says. "I use light gear and run high-vis yellow 6- to 8-pound PowerPro braid tied to a 6-pound Seaguar Tatsu fluorocarbon leader. I like the VMC Spin-Shot hook because when you're using soft-plastics, or even livebait, the hook and line don't twist as easily."

He also uses affordable rod-and-reel setups: "I like the Rosemore 6-foot Whiskey Flats rod for pinpoint casting to shallow fish and the Rosemore 7-foot Double L for deeper drop-shotting. I pair them with 2000-size Daiwa Tatula LT reels. You don't need a larger spool with the light line."

He uses some Japanese soft plastics, along with domestic standbys. "I've been using a bass bait that's likely entirely new to walleye anglers," he says. "The Bellows Gill creature bait by Geecrack is available in 2, 2.8, 3.8, and 5.8 inches. It's covered in scented vibrating ribs. The Japanese have done a lot of research on scents to trigger bites from pressured bass and the same formulas work for walleyes. The Bellows Gill was a good bait for us in the stained water on Lake of the Woods where we won a tournament."

For other, less-stained waters, he uses Northland Tackle 3- and 4-inch Impulse Smelt Minnows, typically starting with white but using smelt-, fathead-, and shiner-imitating patterns, too. He's a fan of Smelly Jelly Bass Feast to help attract fish and getting them to hold on once they bite.

Bellows Gill

VMC Spinshot Hook

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several feet above it. There have been times ice fishing when I've had walleyes hit just below the ice. The point is get to walleyes at their level."

When it comes to the Dakotas and other waters with traditional slow-death or bottom-bouncer bite, he says a drop-shot with a threaded half 'crawler catches more when you find them. "On Lake Oahe I use a threaded bait-hook and a portion of 'crawler and a small spinner on a stealth rig. You don't need a bottom bouncer."

Whether you're a weekend angler or long-practiced student of walleye fishing, drop-shotting can work for you. Get set up with the right gear—a smattering of soft plastics and whatever livebait is available—and give it a shot, literally. The results, as it's so often said, usually speak for themselves. ■

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*Minnesota native and writer Jim Edlund is a frequent contributor to In-Fisherman publications.

Brosdahl's Boat Tech

Brian Brosdahl runs a Lund 219GL Pro rigged with a 400-hp Mercury Verado, 15-hp Mercury kicker, 15-foot Minn Kota Talon, and three Humminbird Helix 15 Gen 4 units. At the console he uses the left unit for LakeMaster mapping, and the right unit for 2D CHIRP sonar, Side Imaging, and Mega Live. He has his Mega Live transducer mounted to a Fishing Specialties pole that he operates at the console, turning it to see 360 degrees around the boat. He sets his Side Imaging to look 70 feet right and left while he uses Mega Live out to 60 feet and spins the pole in all directions. "On spots less than an acre, these settings are all you need," he says. At the bow he runs a Helix 15 and Minn Kota Ulterra.

"I face the boat forward and use Humminbird 360 to find structure and fish," he says. "Looking for fish going into the wind, you can pitch into the wind and your line stays straight. I like to have the fish in front of me or behind me. When you have clients in the boat you don't want several lines all plunking down on the same spots.

"Now, with Mega Live, you see the fish and you pitch right to them, trying to maintain a distance that doesn't spook them. Sometimes you can watch the fish follow and bite the drop-shot. It's amazing."

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BIG WATE

BIG PI

Big-water fisheries can be intimidating. Lake Athabasca, Great Slave, and the Great Lakes, to name a few, all resemble inland seas with depths of hundreds of feet. These lakes seem more suitable for trophy lake trout than pike. Yet, they also grow behemoth fish—as big as any in North America.

Being deep, clear, and expansive, anglers must eliminate unproductive water. Lush green weedbeds are relatively scarce, and even where present, they're not always the best option for the biggest fish all season long. Anglers must be willing to target less-traditional offshore locations to capitalize on baitfish movements.

On Lake of the Woods, Wollaston Lake, the Yukon River drainage, and other sprawling fisheries, a labyrinth of water confronts anglers. Being more nutrient-rich, much of these waters resembles prime pike territory. Here, anglers can get lost in an overload of bays, points, islands, weedbeds, and connecting waterways that seemingly go on forever. When everything looks good, the challenge becomes allocating time appropriately and not getting bogged down in any one area, especially if it's not producing quality fish.

RS,

K-

BY **STEVE RYAN***

» The expansive waters of the Yukon River drainage in central Alaska epitomize big water and host some of the world's biggest pike. Midnight Sun Trophy Pike Adventures owner and guide Scott Rowecamp consistently puts clients on fish that sometimes surpass 50 inches.

Location is everything. Pike can be as selective as any fish species regarding the type of cover they prefer. Trophy pike are especially particular on where they position on this cover. You're looking for the proverbial "spot-on-the-spot." In practice, it often involves several key factors combining in one precise location. Add timing to the mix and you have a challenging puzzle to crack. The bonus being that big pike often travel in loose packs; big-water fisheries produce more big pike, and once located, banner days can be had by those putting in the effort.

The Yukon River

Having just returned from a trophy-pike excursion to the Yukon River drainage in central Alaska, this massive and unique fishery is fresh on my mind, and it provides multiple lessons that translate to a range of fisheries. Sharing a boat with Scott Rowecamp, owner and operator of Midnight Sun Trophy Pike Adventures, we had the benefit of his 20-plus years of cracking the code on record-setting pike throughout the Yukon River system. The experience was both enlightening regarding the unique nature of this fishery and the movement of pike there.

The Yukon River basin draws water from an enormous area. Its watershed encompasses nearly one-third of the interior of central Alaska. Each winter this area packs with snow and ice, which eventually melts and drains via feeders into the Yukon River. This huge influx of water turns the main river into a raging torrent of ice and debris. Pike leave the deep holes of the river where they've wintered and move into more tranquil waters suitable for spawning.

The backwaters of this huge system slowly recede throughout the summer. Pike must continually move and reposition as the water recedes and baitfish vacate the shallows or risk being trapped high and dry. Receding water generates current throughout the side channels that connect remote lakes and sloughs to the Yukon River. The current concentrates baitfish along distinct seams, humps, points, and shorelines. This in turn provides prime hunting grounds for trophy pike and gives anglers a starting point in their search for pike of a lifetime.

Other key factors that influence the location of giant pike on the Yukon River system, and elsewhere, include water clarity, temperature, depth, time of day, and available cover in the form of vegetation or wood. Current, or lack it, must always be taken into consideration when establishing a plan of attack. As the temperature increases throughout the day, pike may move shallower in search of warmer water or may be forced to either inside or outside weededges based upon wind direction and intensity.

Multiple Factors at Play

On big-water fisheries, multiple factors are typically in play at the same time to drive the location of big fish. Some of the most productive areas for catching numbers of big fish are T-channels where a relatively narrow channel from a backwater lake connects to a side river or braid of the river, which would eventually meet up with the main Yukon River. The current in either of these channels was negligible but where they intersected it became more noticeable.

More important was the temperature and color change that occurred along these seams and shorelines. Often a slight hump or point would form at the upstream portion of the connecting channel. If there was a stump, downed tree or weedpatch in the vicinity, it might as well have been a spotting beacon for pike. Large numbers of fish hold in these areas. The first cast in with an appropriate lure was sure to draw interest as big pike were in competition with each other. Five or six fish might be caught from such areas in a matter of minutes. Then, they may scatter just slightly or hold more tightly to the cover or bottom.

By slowing down the presentation, you could often pick up several more fish from these spot-on-the-spot locations. Working down the seam and farther within the connecting channel usually produced additional pike that had either vacated the prime spot or were staging to move up on it.

Lure Strategy

An appropriate lure progression for these areas would start with a heavy-duty spinnerbait with a

»Perhaps the most productive waters for big pike include big drive-to and fly-in waters of the Canadian Shield. To grow big fish, catch-and-release fishing is vital, but the waters also often have to be vast enough so that guides don't end up fishing the same water day after day.

Colorado and Indiana blade combination. Spinnerbaits can be fished quickly, high in the water column the first time through an area, and then slow-rolled deeper as the area is dissected further. This blade combination allows for the rear blade to helicopter down on the fall with greater thump than a willow blade. For this reason, keep a tight line and watch for any line jumps on the pause.

For pike that don't want a bait worked in a straight-line fashion, jerkbaits, articulated swimbaits, and glidebaits are all good options. Jerkbaits offer fantastic flash as they roll on their side before finally stopping and suspending. Jerkbaits are the best of the three options where moderate current exists. Articulated swimbaits give an enticing S-swimming action on a steady retrieve that pike love. They are the easiest of the three baits to work. Cast and retrieve is all it takes to get results. Reel faster when pike are active, and slow down and add pauses when pike become a bit more hesitant.

The third option is a glidebait, perhaps the ultimate big-pike bait when pike are in a neutral or negative mood. A mid-size muskie style glider such as the Psycho Norman Jr. by Harvey Baits draws the attention of trophy pike even under the toughest conditions. This bait sweeps wide from side to side with each quick crank of the reel handle. It flashes on its side as it nears the end of its glide and has a distinct shimmy on the fall. With each movement and pause of the lure, its unique crescent tail-blades flash and spin. It's often these slight movements that trigger pike into striking the lure. For this reason, don't overlook working baits more slowly and deliberately. Give only an occasional quick snap or pull of the bait to change its cadence.

Spoons

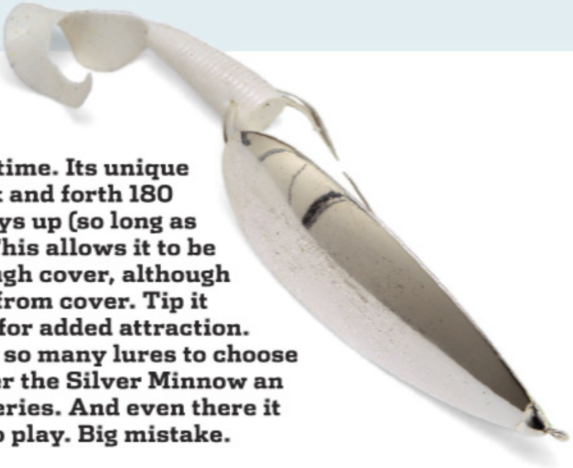
A final must-have lure to work into your rotation is a spoon. During our most recent trip to the Yukon River, the Johnson Silver Minnow was our number-one producer by a wide margin. It's an incredibly versatile lure that can be worked through any cover and has a tremendous hooking and holding percentage with its single fixed-hook design. Other spoons such as Dardevle, Williams, Doctor, Mepps, and Blue Fox work well at times, too.

Spoon selections should be made based on the size, weight, profile, and action that best complement the conditions present.

For added appeal, tip spoons with a small trailer such as a 3-inch Mister Twister curlytail grub or Z-Man splittail. Don't overpower the action of the spoon with a trailer that's too large. A trailer should provide just slightly more kick to the spoon, along with contrasting color. Work spoons with a moderate retrieve speed and break the rhythm of the lure's movement several times throughout the retrieve, especially when fishing near cover.

There are times when the most effective technique is to work spoons similar to fishing a jig. Allow them to contact weeds and then rip them free. Or make bottom contact with the spoon prior to restarting the retrieve.

What all these lures have in common is their relatively modest size, although there are times and locations when giant baits excel for pike. Available forage and time of year influences optimum lure size; however, moderately sized lures generally deliver the best results. These baits can be worked more precisely than oversized offerings, and they allow for more positive hook-sets with less effort.



»The Johnson Silver Minnow is one of the finest all-around pike lures of all time. Its unique design causes it to roll back and forth 180 degrees with the hook always up (so long as it isn't retrieved too fast). This allows it to be slow-rolled along and through cover, although it works just as well alway from cover. Tip it with a small curlytail grub for added attraction. Curiously, these days, with so many lures to choose from, some anglers consider the Silver Minnow an option only for remote fisheries. And even there it often no longer gets put into play. Big mistake.

CATCH THE ACTION.

THE IN-FISHERMAN TELEVISION specials have been airing across North America for over 40 years. In each show, In-Fisherman editors take you to three different parts of North America to fish for three different fish species—everything from bass and walleyes, to catfish and carp, sturgeon, muskies, pike, trout, salmon, and panfish like crappies, perch, bluegills, and white bass. From time to time, we also feature near-shore saltwater species like stripers, redfish, and tarpon.

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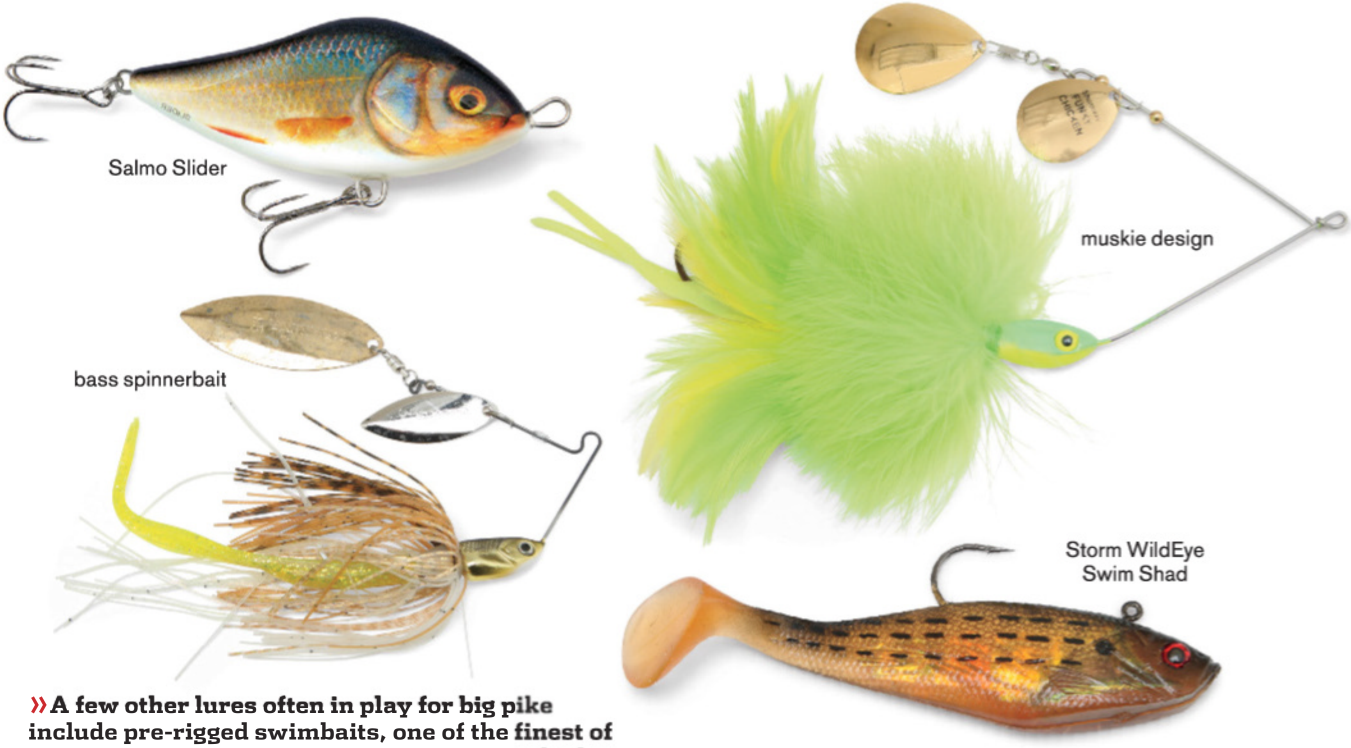

»A few other lures often in play for big pike include pre-rigged swimbaits, one of the finest of which is the 6-inch Storm WildEye Swim Shad, with its combined body swimming action coupled with the paddling tail. One key design factor is that the keel weight is at the base of the body of the bait, which keeps it running true throughout a retrieve. Glidebaits like the Salmo Slider also often are overlooked, although it consistently triggers pike that won't otherwise respond. Finally, along with a host of other options, spinnerbaits ranging from bass designs to smaller muskie options are versatile choices for searching for pike.

Wind

Another prime pike location in this big water system are humps located at the bottom end of lakes situated nearest to the river. Add some vegetation off the inside or outside edge of the hump and we were nearly guaranteed to connect. These humps usually have current along their edges as water is forced out of the lake by wind action and receding water. Pike positioned along these edges to intercept retreating baitfish.

Wind is a powerful creator of water movement that must always be considered no matter what big-water fishery you are fishing. Places such as Wollaston Lake Lodge fly their anglers out to remote locations on this enormous lake to put them on the best possible conditions. That means keeping track of the wind direction over the course of the week and studying the lake map to determine how the wind orients fish.

Islands, points, and shorelines subjected to constant wave action concentrate baitfish. Trolling these locations with the wide kicking action of a Rapala Tail Dancer is a great strategy for locating fish on large pieces of structure that you've never fished. Once you find fish, casting provides a more precise presentation to fool trophy-caliber pike.

One trick when trolling big water for pike is the rod pump. In the days of backtrolling with a tiller motor, anglers were experts at imparting extra action on their lures as they steered the boat and constantly adjusted its speed with one hand and occasionally pumped the rod with their other. The shift away from tiller motors ushered in the comfort and productivity of spreading multiple lines out on in-line planer boards. That meant setting rods in holders, sitting back, and waiting for a board to go back. This also resulted in a more steady presentation from lures.

Pike, like most other fish, are curious by nature. It's easy to get their attention but more challenging to get them to commit to a bait. When straight-line trolling, this equates to fish following a lure for some distance, until losing interest, or taking one nip at the bait and then fading away. Most of us have seen these videos online and wondered how often it occurs with our own presentations.

Pumping the rod triggers more following fish into biting. Also, by holding the rod in your hand, you instantly feel those slight nudges of the lure that fish give to the bait without actually striking it. With a rod in a holder or with a planer board on the line, those nudges go undetected. Once any change in the action of the lure occurs, give a quick rod sweep. Sweep the rod forward 5 feet and then drop it back quickly on a semi-tight line. The slight hesitation and rising of the lure on the drop back often gets pike to strike.

The Great Lakes

On several of the Great Lakes, wind and atmospheric pressure can cause water to pile up along one shoreline, especially in elongated bays. The water then travels back and forth multiple times in a slow, pendulum action from one end to the other end, until the water achieves equilibrium. This oscillation can take several hours, and the intervals between the "slouching" or changing of direction of the water can be as short as several minutes or as long as several hours, depending on the volume of water and size of the bay.

On portions of Green Bay, this seiche phenomenon is a regular occurrence. Astute pike anglers quickly pick up on this water movement and observe that the water moving from Lake Michigan itself through the Sturgeon Bay Shipping Canal is clearer and cooler. Generally, the fishing becomes slower during these periods. When the water moves from the shallower and more fertile Sturgeon Bay back into Lake Michigan, the water takes on more color and warms slightly. Fish tend to get more active under these conditions.

This water oscillation takes place on numerous bays across Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes. Pike take advantage of these conditions and routinely hold near the edge of shipping canals, breakwalls, and any other manmade structures that allow them to ambush baitfish funneled through these narrow corridors. Natural mid-lake humps, rock ridges, and shoals serve the same function, no matter if the water movement is caused by seiches, storm surges, or strong winds. Baitfish get pushed into these areas and big predators make the most of this bountiful prey.

Pay special attention to mid-lake structure resembling a crescent or half circle that extend near the surface. Casting 6-inch swimbaits such as the Storm WildEye Swim Shad, Z-Man SwimmerZ, and Keitech Fat Swing Impact can be deadly when large pods of baitfish become corralled offshore. These swimbaits come in a range of natural colors. They have attractive action at both fast and slow retrieves and can be fished at any depth. While we typically think of pike as ambush hunters feeding upward in the water column, pike are equally adept at rush-feeding and going nose-down on a bait when it serves their interest. So make occasional bottom contact with swimbaits. Snap them off the bottom and slowly swim them back to the boat.

Big water can grow big pike, which makes for exciting fishing so long as you weed through all the dead water to get on fish that often pack into key smaller areas—those spot-on-the-spot locations. Luckily, key factors for finding and then triggering big fish remain somewhat consistent from one big water to the next, although there also are unique qualities to each fishery to factor in. ■

**In-Fisherman* Field Editor Steve Ryan has fished all across the globe and offers insightful commentary on fishing for just about everything that swims, including big pike.

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Northland Fishing Tackle
Northland Fishing Tackle
an "Bro" Brosdahl

from the archives

Appearing in In-Fisherman magazine over a decade ago, these slipbobbering fundamentals and tactical refinements remain deadly on panfish today.

For decades, the use of finely crafted slipbobbers and fixed bobbers have been the province of European anglers and a few panfish, steelhead, and walleye anglers who ply some of the waterways in Canada, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In the world of bobber fishing, Greg Bohn, of Hazelhurst, Wisconsin, comes to mind as one of the best around. He is a skilled and veteran walleye angler and guide, who uses a slipbobber on nearly every outing. His expertise is revealed in the book that he and Scott Richardson wrote entitled *Master the Art of Slip Bobbering.*

Wielding Slipbo

Besides Bohn, Brian "Bro" Brosdahl of Max, Minnesota, Dave Genz of St. Cloud, Minnesota, Bruce Sampson of Maple Plains, Minnesota, Matt Straw of Brainerd, Minnesota, and Mick Thill of Skokie, Illinois and Great Britain, are noted bobber experts. (Thill, who passed away in 2018, was a multispecies angler whose name is emblazoned upon a vast series of bobbers, which Lindy Tackle Company has been making and selling since 1992.) In the bobber world, Thill is sometimes revered as the master of masters.

Straw's handiwork with a bobber revolves around his pursuit of steelhead. Sampson, like Bohn, is primarily a walleye angler. Brosdahl and Genz are noted for their mastery with panfish. Genz is a fixed-bobber devotee, and Brosdahl wields slipbobbers.

Brosdahl's System

Brosdahl has been a full-time guide for 18 years. The 45-year old often plies Bemidji, Cass, Leech, Sand, and Winnibigoshish lakes, as well as smaller waterways across north-central Minnesota. During the spring and summer, he uses a slipbobber 100 percent of the time for panfish when he fishes in either submergent vegetation,

bbers for Panfish

BY **NED KEHDE***

such as cabbage, coontail, sandgrass, eel grass, and milfoil, or emergent vegetation, such as bulrushes, cattails and wild rice.

In the fall, when the bulk of the panfish leave the wilting and dying vegetation, he doesn't use a bobber. Instead, he employs either a vertical presentation when the water is deep enough that the boat doesn't spook the fish, or a dragging presentation in shallower water with the bait a significant distance behind and away from the boat. The distinguished ice angler never uses a bobber for those techniques.

One of Brosdahl's sponsors is Northland Fishing Tackle, and a significant portion of his panfish tackle is made by them. He designed some of it. When float-fishing on spring and summer outings, he prefers Northland's LBSPW3 Lite-Bite Super-Pro Slip Bobber weighted series. This is a 3/4-inch elongated pear-shaped bobber with a brass grommet on the top stem.

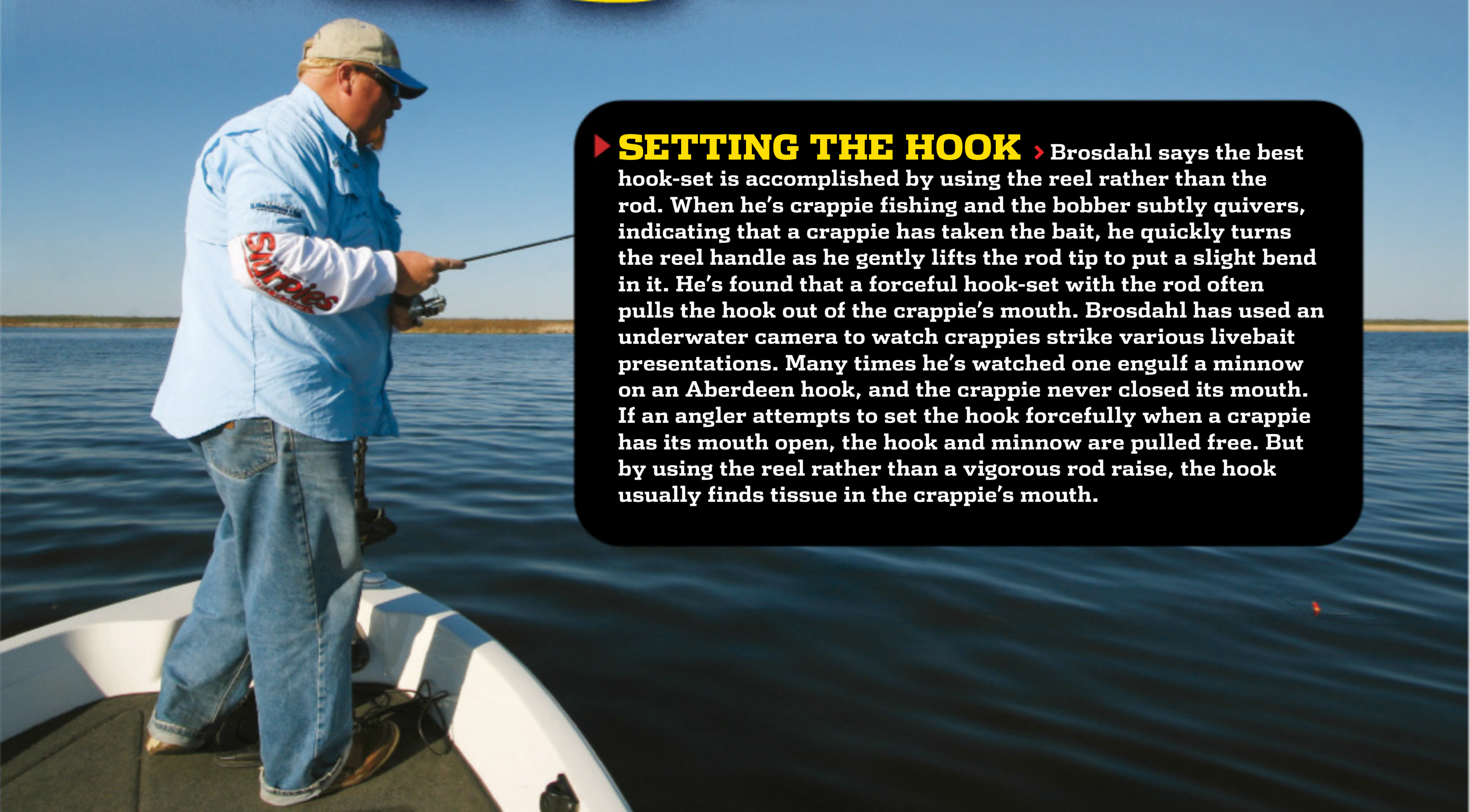
He likes this feature because it allows the line to slide smoothly through the bobber, and it prevents braided line from cutting grooves into the stem. Occasionally, he works with the 5/8-inch bobber when the bites are light. If the water is calm and the bites are extremely light, he often uses the 1/2-inch model. But day in, day out, he prefers the 3/4-incher.

Brosdahl describes the weighted bobber as a boon in windy conditions, explaining that it improves casting accuracy. The only time he works with an unweighted bobber is the rare instance when he isn't fishing around aquatic vegetation. When plying submergent plants, his 10-foot spinning outfit is spooled with 4-pound-test braided line.

To the braided line, he ties a highly visible braid bobber stop. If he's plying depths of 4 to 6 feet, he leaves the tag ends of the bobber stop long, which makes it easier for him to see if his bait is at the correct depth. But if the areas he's fishing are deep enough that the bobber stop is reeled onto the spool of his reel, he shortens the tag end so it won't hinder casting.

The only time he places a bead between the bobber stop and the bobber is when he's having a difficult time seeing the bobber stop to determine if his bait is at the correct depth. He says the brass grommet eliminates the need for a bead, which otherwise prevents the top stem of the bobber from being cut by the line.

After he slips the bobber onto the braided line, he uses what he calls a super-improved clinch knot to attach a #12 black crane swivel. He ties it by threading the end of the line through the top eye of the swivel. Then he

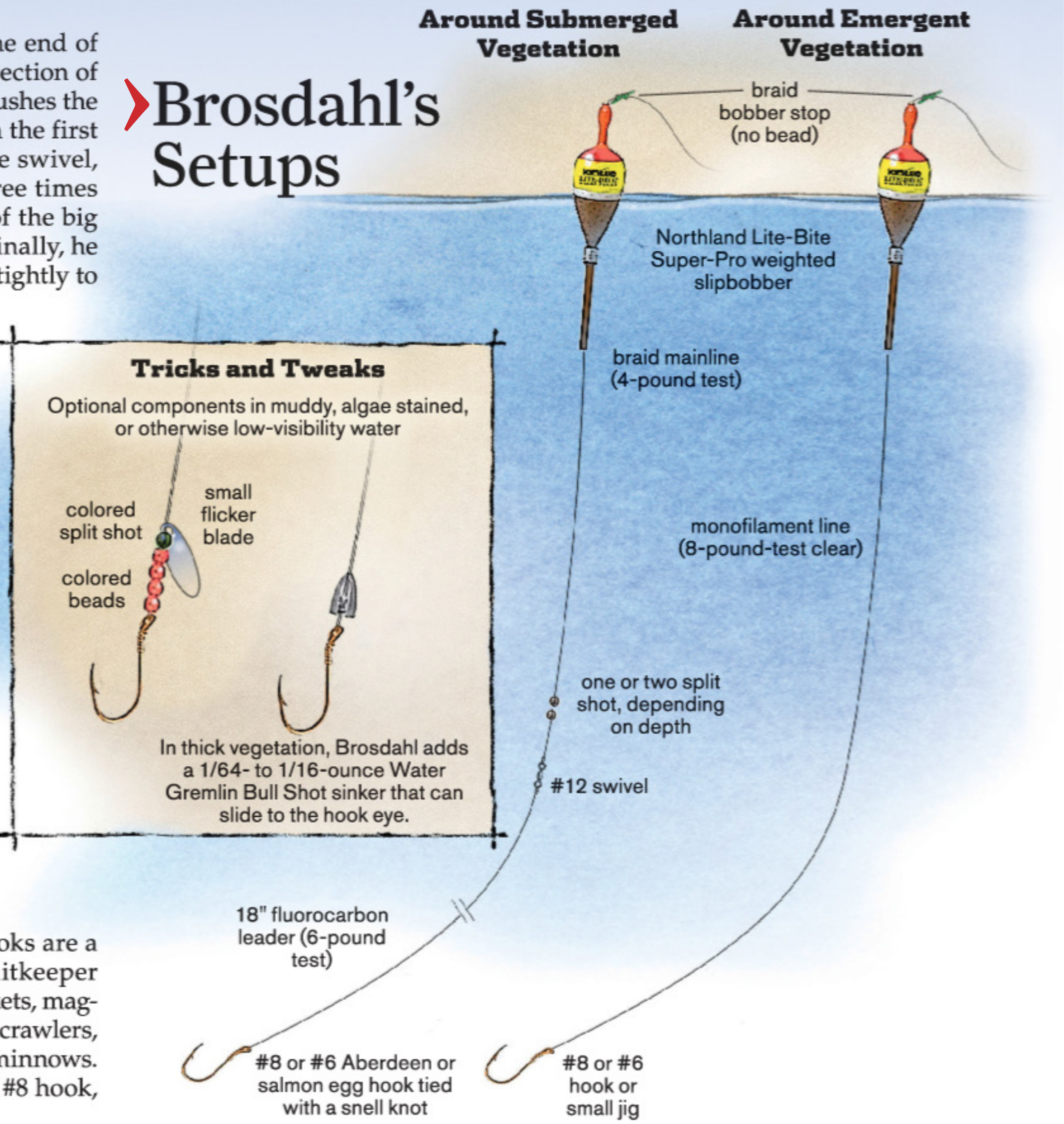


SETTING THE HOOK › **Brosdahl says the best hook-set is accomplished by using the reel rather than the rod. When he's crappie fishing and the bobber subtly quivers, indicating that a crappie has taken the bait, he quickly turns the reel handle as he gently lifts the rod tip to put a slight bend in it. He's found that a forceful hook-set with the rod often pulls the hook out of the crappie's mouth. Brosdahl has used an underwater camera to watch crappies strike various livebait presentations. Many times he's watched one engulf a minnow on an Aberdeen hook, and the crappie never closed its mouth. If an angler attempts to set the hook forcefully when a crappie has its mouth open, the hook and minnow are pulled free. But by using the reel rather than a vigorous rod raise, the hook usually finds tissue in the crappie's mouth.**

makes nine wraps with the end of the line around the main section of the braided line. Next he pushes the tag end of the line through the first loop, nearest the eye of the swivel, and wraps the tag end three times around the doubled line of the big loop that he just created. Finally, he wets the knot and cinches tightly to the swivel. He has never had this knot slip.

To the bottom eye of the swivel, he attaches 18 inches of 6-pound-test fluorocarbon leader. He uses the super-improved clinch knot with seven twists around the mainline and two around the doubled line of the loop. Fluorocarbon leader material that comes off the spool without curling is important in Brosdahl's ability to place a bait within a small opening in a patch of vegetation. A straight line allows the bait to drop without entwining the leaves and stems. The hook or jig is attached to the leader with the same knot.

His favorite livebait hooks are a salmon-egg style with baitkeeper barbs on the shank for crickets, maggots, waxworms, and nightcrawlers, and an Aberdeen-style for minnows. Most of the time he uses a #8 hook,



Brosdahl's Setups

Around Submerged Vegetation
Around Emergent Vegetation
braid bobber stop (no bead)
Northland Lite-Bite Super-Pro weighted slipbobber
braid mainline (4-pound test)
monofilament line (8-pound-test clear)
one or two split shot, depending on depth
#12 swivel
18" fluorocarbon leader (6-pound test)
#8 or #6 Aberdeen or salmon egg hook tied with a snell knot
#8 or #6 hook or small jig
colored split shot
small flicker blade
colored beads

Tricks and Tweaks

Optional components in muddy, algae stained, or otherwise low-visibility water

In thick vegetation, Brosdahl adds a 1/64- to 1/16-ounce Water Gremlin Bull Shot sinker that can slide to the hook eye.

A SOUTHERN TOUCH ON THE SLIPBOBBER

Todd Huckabee of Eufaula, Oklahoma, helped Lindy Fishing Tackle design and create the Thill Premium Crappie Float. It's available in four sizes, one for a 1/16-ounce jig, one for an 1/8-ounce jig, one for a 1/4-ounce jig, and one for a 3/8-ounce jig. The jig size is printed on each float.

When you use the proper size jig, the float's black lateral line is flush with the lake's surface. The top stem of the bobber is endowed with highly visible braided bobber stop, which can be slipped off the stem, onto the line, and securely cinched onto the line. The top stem has an insert that stops the bobber stop, which eliminates the need for a bead. There's a spring on the bottom stem to facilitate a fixed bobber rig. Its hot-pink top and chartreuse bottom make bite detection easy even when a crappie swims up toward the bobber while engulfing the jig.

Huckabee uses a float when Eufaula Lake's crappies inhabit shallow shorelines during the spawn. He's used it to catch them in water as shallow at 6 inches, which he couldn't access by any method other than making an extremely long cast with a Thill Premium Crappie Float.

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but when he baits with large fatheads and shiner minnows, he uses a #6 Aberdeen.

When he uses a livebait rig in submergent vegetation, he adds a split shot 18 to 24 inches above the hook. He favors soft-lead and colored shot. In deeper water he places shot 6 inches apart. The average depth he fishes submergent vegetation is 9 feet, the deepest 18 feet. In addition to depth, wind conditions and the type of vegetation influence sinker choice.

Around Emergents

To fish a slipbobber around emergent vegetation, Brosdahl opts for 8-pound-test clear monofilament, preferring the rounder shape of mono. Round braid is an option. He avoids flatter superlines, which can cut into emergent vegetation, making presentation more difficult. He uses the same bobber stop as on braided line. The stop is cinched to the line as tightly as possible, but if it slides up the line during a cast, he uses two stops placed next to each other to prevents this.

When fishing emergent vegetation he ditches the swivel and leader, instead snelling the mainline directly to the hook. He doesn't use split shot around emergent vegetation. Consequently, the bottom stem of the bobber rests on the eye of the hook on the cast. To keep the eye of the hook from lodging in the stem, he places a bead on the line between the bobber and the hook eye. When the bobber and hook or jig are together, Brosdahl can execute accurate casts and pitches into small pockets within a labyrinth of bulrushes, cattails, and wild rice. The depths that he normally probes in emergent vegetation range from 4 to 6 feet.

During summer, when some of the lakes he fishes become stained with algae, Brosdahl often places several beads and a colored split shot immediately above the hook or jig. Sometimes, he adds a small spinner, or flicker, blade for attraction.

In thick vegetation, he works with 1/64- to 1/16-ounce slipsinkers or Water Gremlin's Bull Shot sinkers, which are bullet-shaped split shot. They slide down to the eye of the hook, which facilitates accurate casting, especially in windy conditions.

An important function of the jig and sinkers is to make the bobber neutrally or barely buoyant so a tentative panfish won't be startled by a bobber that's too buoyant to allow them to pull a bait down. When a LBSWP3-12 Lite-Bite Slip Bobber Super-Pro is correctly rigged, only its short fluorescent-red stem is above water.

Brosdahl says buoyancy in the same size and model of bobber can vary, so he checks each new bobber before using it. That's the first calibration in Brosdahls's slipfloat system. From there it's all about using the right rigging and making the most accurate casts and precise presentations possible. The reward is scores of big panfish. ■

**In-Fisherman* Field Editor Ned Kehde lives in Lawrence, Kansas. Contact: Guide Brian Brosdahl, 218/340-6051, *brosguideservice.com*.

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Major rivers like the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and Tennessee have more of everything when it comes to trophy flathead catfish. More water, more structure, more flatheads, and more challenges. Flatheads are tricky to find in any river, but they can be a special challenge to find in rivers whose widths are measured in thousands of yards, with depths approaching triple digits.

BIG *Rivers* BIG *Flatheads*

SEA

One of the secrets to finding flatheads in big water is to "think small."

"When I'm fishing the Mississippi, I break it down in my mind into small areas, and fish those areas like small rivers," says Darren Troseth, catfish guide on the Mississippi, Minnesota, and St. Croix rivers near Minneapolis/St. Paul. "A logjam is a logjam, and a mid-river hole is a mid-river hole, whether it's on a small river or a big river. A big thing for me is the time of year, because it determines where flatheads will be within an entire river system."

Flatheads feed aggressively as water temperatures rise into the 50s and 60s during prespawn. That's when they frequent areas where baitfish gather in big rivers—below dams, the mouths of tributaries, and behind major current breaks such as wing dams and other control structures. The spawn begins once water temperatures reach the 70s. Since they're cavity spawners, areas of large riprap, gnarly root balls, and other cavities attract multiple flatheads during the spawn. After the spawn they disperse to specific locations where they set up residence for the summer.

"When individual flatheads move from spawning habitat to their summer territory, they aren't searching for just any logjam or hole," says Dr. Jason Vokoun, a fishery scientist who conducted a multi-year study of radio-tagged flatheads in Missouri rivers. "Our fish traveled to specific spots, often the same spot where they spent the previous summer. Once they got there, they rarely moved. We stayed in radio contact with some of the fish 24 hours a day, sometimes checked them every 15 minutes, and it calculated out that some of them were stationary for up to 23.1 hours a day."

BY **DAN ANDERSON***

»For catfish guide Darren Troseth, where to look for flatheads starts with an understanding of how the time of year factors into their overall location. PHOTO // JOHN KIMBLE

RCH PATTERNS AND STRATEGIES

Vokoun, always careful not to assume "why" fish do what they do without documented proof, and reluctant to attribute human characteristics to fish, cautiously suggested that his radio-tagged flatheads spent most of the time resting and moved only to feed.

"When they moved out of the spots where they spent most of their time, they made direct movements, often to the same shallow drop-off or sandbar they visited on previous excursions, where we assume they fed on baitfish common to those areas," he says. "They didn't hang out in those spots for long periods, or wander around on their way to and from those spots. After a short period in what we assume were feeding areas, they generally went directly back to the logjam or hole where they settled in and didn't move much for a long period of time."

The generic behavior of flatheads in rivers as detailed by Vokoun provides anglers three opportunities to catch the big fish: in their "bedrooms" where they spend most of their time, on the way to and from feeding areas, and at feeding grounds. Each opportunity has advantages and disadvantages.

"They're easier to pinpoint when they're just laying behind a log and resting, compared to when they're roaming around feeding on a big flat," says Ohio River catfish guide Dale Broughton. "Night or day, the first places I look are where I know they like to rest because that's where they spend most of their time."

The second option, catching flatheads while they're traveling between resting and feeding areas, requires research and patience. Flatheads don't wander aimlessly

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between their bedroom and kitchen; like any catfish, they tend to follow linear structure in the river channel as they move up- or downstream. They often move along the base of cutbanks, along boundaries where riprap on a bank meets the bottom of a river, or along the edges of any troughs eroded in the bottom of a main channel. Anglers who position baits along one of those catfish highways have an opportunity to intercept multiple flatheads as the big fish make their individual movements between resting and feeding areas.

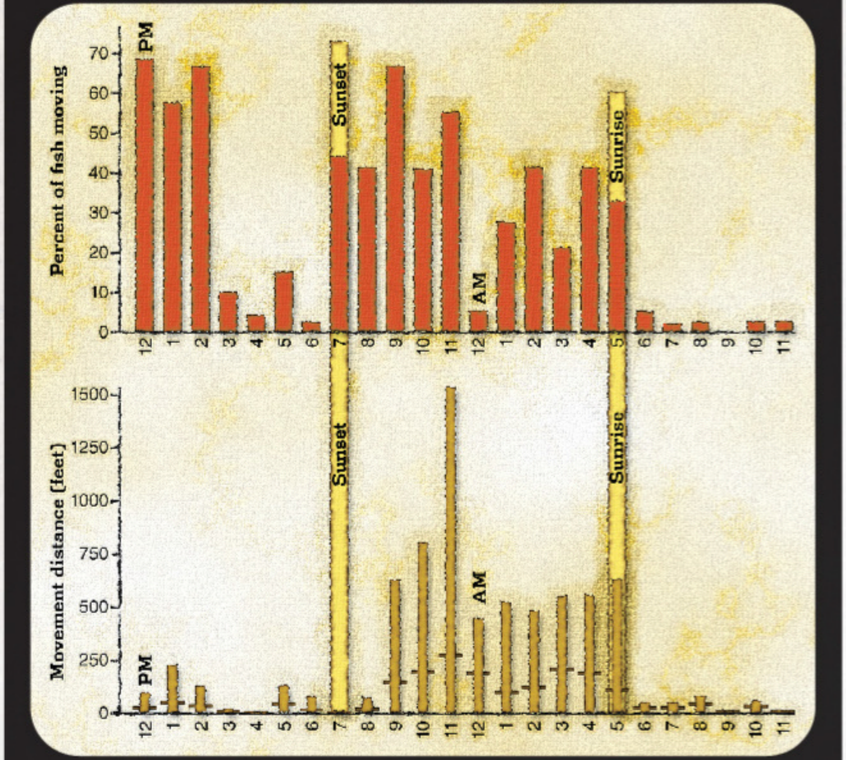
The final option targets flatheads in feeding mode. Vokoun's tracking of radio-tagged flatheads indicates they routinely return to specific shallow flats, mouths of small tributaries, and current breaks that attract baitfish in numbers. Feeding flatheads bite aggressively, but are often spread across large flats and sometimes difficult to locate. Drifting or slow-strolling baits over feeding areas or across the mouths of tributaries can be an effective way to locate roaming flatheads.

Three-Dimensional Fishing

Anglers in small, comparatively shallow rivers must search "far" and "wide" to find flatheads, but anglers in big rivers must think in three dimensions: far, wide, and deep.

"I started out fishing for flatheads on the Muskingum River in Ohio, and looked for flatheads in log piles in maybe 20 feet of water," says catfish guide Aaron Massey.

24-Hour Flatheads



Dr. Jason Vokoun located six river flatheads every 15 minutes during a 24-hour period. The top graph shows the percentage that made movements to and from habitat features like submerged logs and clay points for each hour of the day. The bottom graph shows the extent of those movements. The vertical lines show the ranges of movements made, from shortest to longest, and the horizontal dashes are the average distances. Notice that at certain times of the day, most of the fish may be moving, although the movements are short, such as in early afternoon or just after sunset. The longest movements occur several hours after sunset.

»Guide Aaron Massey will put fresh cutbait up against livebait in many flathead fishing situations.

"Now that I'm living in Tennessee, sometimes I'm in the Tennessee River Gorge fishing in 40 to 60 feet of water. But I also fish in river-run sections of the Tennessee where 20 feet is considered deep. Flatheads will always be in or close to the deepest water in an area, whether it's 20 feet or 60 feet."

Broughton, who fishes on the Ohio River, sometimes adjacent to downtown Cincinnati, where his clients can often see the Jumbotron at Paycor Stadium from his boat and watch Bengals' games while they fish, agrees with Massey.

"They'll be shallower during prespawn in the spring, and definitely shallow once the water hits 70°F and the spawn is on," he says. "But once the spawn is over and they're into a summer pattern, they'll be in deep water. On the Markland Pool of the Ohio, that means as deep as 70 feet in places. The only question is exactly where they are in the deep water, and that depends on current."

Flatheads have an affinity for current. They may not live in strong current, but they don't avoid it and like to be near it. The late Ted Hirtes guided anglers to flatheads in the Missouri River near Omaha and caught his biggest flatheads from deep midriver holes associated with the river's full force, or below submerged midriver sandbars.

"Everybody fishes logjams visible along the shoreline," Hirtes said in an interview before his death. "Those logjams can be overfished. I catch bigger flatheads when I fish midriver holes and drop-offs nobody else knows about. If my sonar shows a 30- or 40-foot hole in a stretch where the average bottom is at 20 feet, I'm interested. If I see some logs and root balls down in the bottom of that hole, I get excited. Deep holes with junk in the bottom are where the big boys live."

Hirtes was also fond of sandbars in 10 to 15 feet of water that drop off into 20 to 25 feet, but was fussy about the "age" of the sandbar.

"The Missouri River between Iowa and Nebraska typically runs at 3 to 5 mph," he said, "and sandbars are constantly moving. I want a sandbar that's stable, that's been there for a while rather than a new sandbar that has a lot of sand moving around. Flatheads will lay just below the edge or at the bottom of an old sandbar. They don't seem to like a bar that's still forming. I think there's too much sand moving around. I'd guess it's like being in a sandstorm."

Big River Baits

Flathead hunters on small to midsize rivers are often adamant about using only livebaits. "It's got to be alive to catch a flathead," is a common theme. But Broughton, Massey, and Troseth often use cutbaits—big, fresh, bloody cutbaits.

"I like cutbait because it's easier to use frozen cutbait or net some bait and then throw it on ice," Broughton says. "You don't have to mess with keeping cutbait alive. If river level and the current are right, I fish eight rods, with four rods baited with cutbait and four with 6- to 10-inch live gizzard shad, to see what they want. In slower current, flatheads feed off of vibration. In a deep hole with slow current I use a really lively shad on a 2-foot leader so it can swim around and around. If there are any flatheads in the neighborhood, the shad's vibrations call them in. In heavier current, I think it's harder for them to detect vibrations of a live shad because of leaves, grass, and debris moving and making noise in the river. That's when the scent and flavor of cutbait come into play. They follow that scent and track it down."

Massey agrees. When he's on a low-current stretch of the Tennessee River he drifts suspended baits or slow-trolls cutbaits behind Spread Em planer boards in search of active flatheads. In stronger currents, he anchors above structure—submerged wood, drop-offs—puts out a spread of fresh cutbaits, and lets the current spread the flavor.

"When I've gone back to Ohio and fished the Muskingum where I used to think I had to use livebait, I've caught a lot of flatheads using fresh cutbait," he says. "I'd be 100 percent confident fishing for trophy flatheads almost anywhere with nothing but a big bag of fresh gizzard shad in my cooler. That goes against tradition about how to catch flatheads, but I've proven to myself that fresh cutbait is just as good as livebait."

Minnesota's Troseth selects his baits according to season. Prespawn, he favors 8- to 9-inch live bullheads. Live, large creek chubs are his second choice for early-season flatheads.

"Postspawn and into summer, I'll have both livebaits and cutbaits out, to make sure my clients get the best possible chance for action," he says. "It's a myth that flatheads will only take livebaits. There are times from late June into July when big, fresh, bloody chunks of creek chub or sucker catch as many or more flatheads as livebait. If you only fish one kind of bait, you're reducing your chance of giving flatheads what they want that particular day or night.

"Medium" Tackle on Big Rivers

There is a temptation when fishing for flatheads, especially on "big water," to use heavyweight rods, reels, and lines. "Unnecessary," say our big-river flathead professionals.

"I use 8-foot 6-inch Mad Katz S-glass rods with Okuma Coronado CDX65 spinning reels loaded with 80-pound-test PowerPro Moonshine braided line for both my mainline and leader on my Carolina rigs," Troseth says. "The Okuma drags are rated to 34 pounds and really smooth. I like spinning reels because they're less maintenance—I'm not always changing out worm gears and pawls, and if I have left-handed clients I can switch the handle to make things more comfortable for them."

Troseth matches his hook design and size to his bait selection. For cutbaits he ties on a 7/0 to 10/0 circle hook. When using livebait he prefers 9/0 or 10/0 Kahle hooks.

Broughton uses old-school 7½-foot Berkley E-Cat rods updated with stainless-steel line guides. Penn Fathom II 25-size reels and Abu Garcia Ambassadeur 7000 reels are loaded with 40-pound-test Berkley Big Game Solar monofilament line, tied to Carolina rigs with 100-pound-test KastKing leaders. If fishing with cutbait, his hooks are 8/0 Gamakatsu circle hooks. With livebait he prefers 8/0 to 10/0 Gamakatsu Octopus hooks specially rigged to keep frisky livebaits from double-hooking themselves.

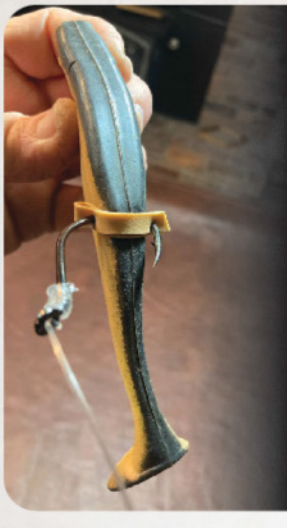
»Ohio River catfish guide Dale Broughton: "Night or day, the first places I look are where I know flatheads like to rest, because that's where they spend most of their time."

"A gizzard shad will flip around and end up with the tip of the hook stuck in their body, which reduces hookups," he says. "I take a 3/8-inch-wide rubber band, push the hook through the doubled rubber band and slide the rubber band up the shank of the hook. Then I put my shad on the hook, run the rubber band over the top of its back, hook the free end over the tip of the hook, and push the rubber band down against the top of the shad's back. The rubber band holds the baitfish down in the bottom curve of the Octopus hook and keeps it from flopping around and double-hooking itself."

Massey favors 7-foot 6-inch heavy-power Big Cat Fever rods, or Ugly Stik Tiger Sticks with medium-heavy power. He selects reels for durability, favoring Penn 320GTi and Abu Garcia 7000 baitcaster reels he loads with 40-pound ProSpec monofilament mainline and 80-pound-test Ande mono leaders on his Carolina rigs snelled with 10/0 Daiichi circle hooks.

"I use high-visibility yellow and orange line," he says. "I prefer mono because it's thicker than braided line of a similar pound-test rating. With mono, I find it more abrasion resistant, because it has a thicker diameter to wear away compared to braid—important if you're fishing in heavy cover and know the line is going to get rubbed on a lot of rocks and other structure and cover."

His concern about his lines abrading on structure goes to the heart of a basic premise of fishing for flatheads: find structure in any river and you'll probably find flathead catfish. And since rivers like the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and Tennessee have more structure simply because they're big rivers, there's more potential for flatheads. Big flatheads. Once anglers figure out how to expand their search patterns and strategies for trophy flatheads in big rivers, the only "problem" is which spot to fish when there are so many opportunities. ■



» Guide Dale Broughton uses a rubberband to pin baits to hook bends so they don't get foul-hooked as they swim and struggle. Start by clipping a section a 3/8-inch rubberband, or just double a whole rubber band if it's not too long. Insert the doubled end onto the hook, and slide it up the hook shank. Hook the bait onto the hook. Finish by wrapping the loose end of the rubber band over the bait, hooking the end onto the hook, and snugging up the rubberband so the bait is pinned in the hook bend.

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*Dan Anderson, Bouton, Iowa, is an avid angler and a regular contributor to In-Fisherman publications. Guide contacts: Dale Broughton, *fishohioriver.com*; Aaron Massey, *tennesseeriveradventures.net*; Darren Troseth, *3riversfishingadventures.com*.

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BY **DR. HAL SCHRAMM***

Insider Visions AND VIEWS

Power Fishing—Using Electricity to Increase Catch

Recreational anglers compete for a finite resource. For charter captains, the outcome is judged by client bookings. Some boats catch fish and retain a full booking of clients; some boats don't and struggle for clients. Individual anglers, whether fishing in a tournament or just out for a day's fishing, also compete, sometimes with another angler, always with the fish. On any given day, some anglers have good catches, some don't.

When it comes to catching fish, there is nothing you can buy that replaces the knowledge gained from time on the water. Modern-day electronics certainly help anglers find fish and present baits to the right spot or the right depth in the water column. But neither knowledge nor modern-day sonars attract fish. And they don't make fish bite.

But maybe electricity does.

The Scotty Black Box

More than 60 years ago Bill Russell wondered if electric conditions differed between boats that catch fish and those that don't. He found differences in electric voltage between catching boats and non-catching boats. Differences were attributed to hull material and how well onboard electrical devices and outboard motors were grounded. It appeared that boats surrounded by an electric field of 0.6 to 0.8 volts had better catches, suggesting the fish were attracted to the boat. Or maybe, boats with the wrong electric conditions repelled fish.

The voltage in the water around a boat can be measured with a voltmeter, and voltage leaks can be remedied. But Russell envisioned an electrical device that could not only change the electric field around the boat but also change the electrical conditions at the end of a long stainless-steel trolling line where the lures are.

Scotty Black Box

A positive output from the black box is connected to the stainless-steel trolling line, usually by connecting to the thimble that the line passes through as it leaves the boat. With the boat hull as the ground (or grounding plates attached to a wood or fiberglass hull) and the line as a highly conductile positive electrode, a fish-attracting voltage can be applied in the vicinity of the lures or baits.

Bill Russell's son Malcolm Russell now manufactures the Scotty Black Box (Russell Electronics, *malcolm_russell@shaw.ca*). Tweaks over time have led to new models. The present black box for commercial boats is Model 7, and three versions have been made for recreational fishers. More detail on the use of the Scotty Black Box can be found at *https://scotty.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Black-Box-Booklet.pdf*.

Do they work? Malcom Russell estimated that more than 20,000 units have been installed on commercial and recreational fishing boats. The black boxes don't get a lot of publicity and have received only scant scientific evaluation (see below). Admittedly, that makes me a little skeptical, but secrecy is economic survival among many fishers exploiting a finite fishery. For example, some heavily regulated Pacific salmon fisheries are fished from an opening time until a pre-established harvest quota is reached and then the fishery is closed. Obviously, boats that have high catch rates have a tremendous advantage and can be expected to be secretive.

EFAs, Anodes, and EChips—Modifying the Electric Potential of Lures

The Scotty Black Box apparently boosts fish catches for troll fisheries by making the boat or the steel downrigger cables from the boat electrically attractive to fish. Similarly, the voltage surrounding a non-trolling boat—one in which anglers are still fishing or casting—also could determine whether fish are attracted or repelled. And even if fish aren't repelled, those that are subjected to unnatural or undesirable electric conditions may not be catchable if they sense something unusual. Could the modified electric fields of the Scotty Black Box be made "castable?"

Every lure, sinker, swivel, or other piece of metal on the line has the potential to generate electricity. The metal in this terminal tackle is an alloy of various metal elements—aluminum, copper, iron, lead, manganese, nickel, tin, tungsten, zinc, and others. Electric potential is generated when electrons flow from one metal to another. The chemical composition of the metal in your terminal tackle and the concentration of dissolved solids in the water in which you are fishing, which serves as the electrolyte just as sulfuric acid is the electrolyte in a lead-acid battery, determines the voltage produced by your tackle.

Rick Crozier has used the fundamentals of electron transfer (generated electric potential) between chemical elements to create an electric field. In the words on the package, the Electron Fish Attractor (EFA; *lifesparkfishingtackle.com*) "surrounds your bait or lure with an electron field that simulates the natural field projected by a wounded or sick fish in trauma." The EFA is a small metal coil through which your line passes before being tied to the hook or lure.

The total dissolved solids in the water, which range from 40 to 400 parts per million in most fresh waters, affect the electric potential of the EFA. The EFA is available in three sizes to help anglers achieve attractive electric conditions in the water they are fishing. Therefore, some amount of experimentation is needed to dial in the right size EFA, according to Crozier. The upside is that total dissolved solids in a body of water change relatively little over time, so once the right size EFA is determined, the same size should be effective in the future.

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Qty: 3 Size: 12 inch

Life Spark Fishing Tackle

assortment of Electron Fish Attractors

jig rigged with an EFA

As a fourth-generation salmon troller, Allan Dampier is very familiar with the Scotty Black Box and its purported effect on catch. Similar to EFAs, Dampier's Anodes (*lurecharge.ca*) are easily attached to trolling lures or flashers. The small Anodes could easily be used with any metal fishing lure. Lurecharge also sells voltage-tuned lures, portable black boxes, and tuning kits that include stainless-steel swivels and hooks for your own lures for both fresh and salt water.

Dick Pool has taken a slightly different approach with the EChip sold by Pro-Troll Fishing and Marine (*protroll.com*). The EChip is a small stainless-steel tube that contains a metal ball and a highly engineered and sensitive crystal at one end of the tube. When the ball hits the tube and puts a mechanical strain on the crystal, the crystal emits low-voltage (2 millivolt) pulses intended to simulate electric nerve discharges of prey. Movement of the lure or hook to which the EChip is attached causes the ball to move and the crystal to emit a low-voltage pulse.

Lurecharge Trolling Lure
Tuner
Hot Mini Anodes

Pool emphasized that the EChip must be electrically isolated from a hook or metal fishing lure. Pro-Troll sells EChip kits and a variety of lures and flashers that use the EChip. Pro-Troll also sells a black box that is specifically designed for recreational fishing boats deploying four or fewer downriggers. The website also provides a downloadable "Black Box Techniques" book that provides a lucid explanation of electric fields around boats and how to use a black box.

Do EFAs, Anodes, and EChips up your catch rate? Although Crozier, Dampier, and Pool have conducted their own tests, neither product has received independent scientific evaluation. Both EFAs and Anodes are only available through their websites, and Crozier and Dampier report moderate sales and repeat customers. EChip and other Pro-Troll products are available through Cabela's and many trout and salmon tackle suppliers.

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EChips

Fish Electroreception

The ability of fish to detect electric fields has been known for more than 50 years and received considerable scientific attention. Electroreception falls into two categories: active and passive. Active electroreception (electrolocation) occurs in fishes that emit electrical discharges and monitor, via electroreceptive organs, distortions in the electric field caused by objects. In essence, it works like sonar, except sound trains are replaced by electric discharges. Active electroreception is restricted to weakly electric South American knifefishes and African elephant fishes. Active electroreception is useful for navigating and finding prey in turbid waters. It also may be useful for communication among fish of the same or closely related species.

Passive electroreception is much more common and exhibited by approximately 15 percent of known fishes. Passive electroreception is well developed in sharks and rays. Among freshwater fishes, passive electroreception is known only from paddlefish, sturgeon, and catfishes. All these fish have electroreceptor organs. A primary function of passive electroreception is prey detection. Many experiments have demonstrated that passive electroreceptive fish are able to rely exclusively on electric stimuli to locate prey, even prey buried in bottom sediments.

At this point you may detect a disconnect: the fishes known to have passive electroreception organs are not, with the exception of catfish and sturgeon, the commercial and recreational fishes exploited by fishers using devices that manipulate the electric conditions in the vicinity of the boat or the lure or bait.

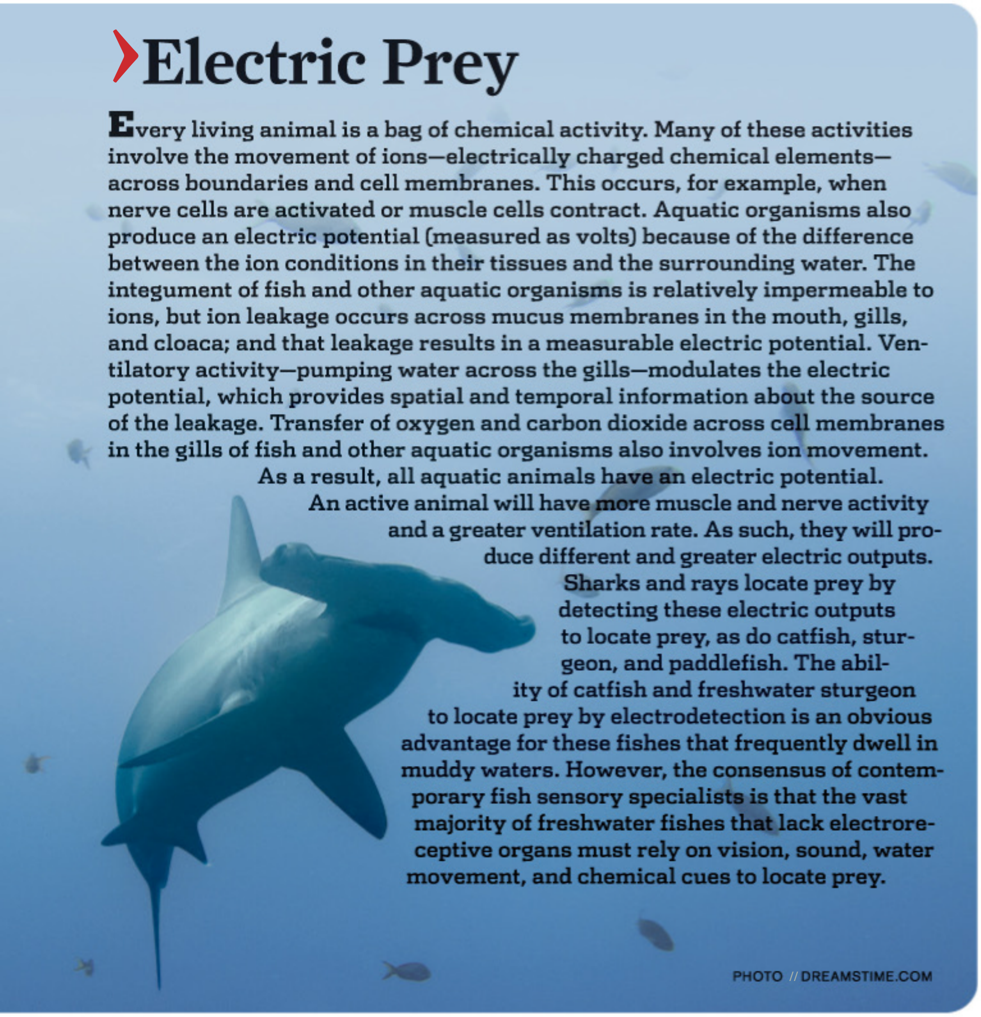
Fish lacking electroreceptive organs—electroreceptors—have no physiological or anatomical way to detect weak electric fields according to Dr. William Crampton, a sensory ecologist at University of Central Florida who has done extensive research on electroreception in South American electric knifefish and authored a comprehensive review of electroreception in fishes. True, fish exhibit galvanotaxis (they are attracted to the positive electrode in a direct-current field) and are routinely sampled by electrofishing as a result of attraction by galvanotaxis and muscular tetany ("stunned"), but these are involuntary responses to strong electric fields, often with outputs near 500 volts and 3 to 10 amps. Don't fall into the water!

A Master's thesis by Daniel Nomura completed in 1979 at the University of British Columbia provides support for weak electric fields enhancing salmon catch in troll fisheries. Using a device equivalent to a Scotty Black Box, different positive and negative voltages were applied to paired trolled lures, each receiving a different voltage. Catch rates of Chinook salmon were significantly greater for lures with a positive (the lure was the positive electrode) 0.5 volts than for 0.0 volts (the lure had no electric potential) or for negative (the lure had a negative charge) 0.5 volts; catch rates were not significantly different between positive 1.0 volts and 0.0 volts.

Similar results were obtained for sockeye salmon, but greater voltages were needed to elicit a response. Catch rate was not different between positive 0.5 volts vs. 0.0 volts or between negative 0.5 volts vs. 0.0 volts. Catch rate was greater for positive 1.0 volts than for 0.0 volts and was less for negative 1.0 volts than for 0.0 volts.

Conclusion: the electric potential of a lure can affect strikes. The desirable electric potential is a small voltage range and is species specific.

Despite familiarity with Nomura's findings, Crampton maintains that fishes lacking electroreceptive organs are unable to detect weak electric fields. He also notes that this 1979 thesis was never published in the peer-reviewed scientific literature. (Peer review is the judgement of the validity of methods, results, and their interpretation by scientific colleagues with expertise on the subject and determines whether a scientific study warrants publication in the scientific literature.) Whether Nomura's study was not submitted for publication in the scientific literature or was submitted but rejected for publication is not



Electric Prey

Every living animal is a bag of chemical activity. Many of these activities involve the movement of ions—electrically charged chemical elements—across boundaries and cell membranes. This occurs, for example, when nerve cells are activated or muscle cells contract. Aquatic organisms also produce an electric potential (measured as volts) because of the difference between the ion conditions in their tissues and the surrounding water. The integument of fish and other aquatic organisms is relatively impermeable to ions, but ion leakage occurs across mucus membranes in the mouth, gills, and cloaca; and that leakage results in a measurable electric potential. Ventilatory activity—pumping water across the gills—modulates the electric potential, which provides spatial and temporal information about the source of the leakage. Transfer of oxygen and carbon dioxide across cell membranes in the gills of fish and other aquatic organisms also involves ion movement. As a result, all aquatic animals have an electric potential. An active animal will have more muscle and nerve activity and a greater ventilation rate. As such, they will produce different and greater electric outputs. Sharks and rays locate prey by detecting these electric outputs to locate prey, as do catfish, sturgeon, and paddlefish. The ability of catfish and freshwater sturgeon to locate prey by electrodetection is an obvious advantage for these fishes that frequently dwell in muddy waters. However, the consensus of contemporary fish sensory specialists is that the vast majority of freshwater fishes that lack electroreceptive organs must rely on vision, sound, water movement, and chemical cues to locate prey.

PHOTO // DREAMSTIME.COM

known. Crampton also notes that much more powerful statistical analyses are now available than in 1979, and their application may nullify some of statistically significant effects found by Nomura. But maybe of greater significance, scientists working in sensory ecology and electroreception of weak electric fields have either not pursued Nomura's findings or not found any evidence of weak electric field detection by fish lacking electroreceptors in the ensuing 40 years. Negative results are rarely published in the scientific literature, so it is unknown if or how many scientists looked for weak electric field detection by fish lacking electroreceptors and failed to find examples.

Crampton also noted that salmon, the fish featured in Nomura's study and the usual target of commercial and sport anglers manipulating electric fields, have no electrosensory ability but do have a well-known magnetic sense. Magnetoreception is still poorly understood by biologists, but Crampton mentioned the possibility that the black box devices could conceivably also generate weak magnetic fields, which in turn might be detectable by salmon and other fish with a magnetic sense.

Do Weak Electric Fields Affect Catches?

The available biological evidence suggests that fish with electroreceptors can detect weak electric fields and use the electrical stimuli to locate prey. For these fishes, the right electric conditions might increase catch. But weak electric field detection is unlikely for 85 percent of the world's fishes—which includes most North American sport fishes—lacking electroreceptive organs.

Evaluating the effectiveness of different fishing methods or lures defies scientific testing. Any meaningful evaluation must be done in natural, stimulus-rich habitats where fish are not distributed randomly. And fishing has an almost endless list of covariates—lure type, size, and color; depth; presentation speed and nuances; and which side of the log you cast to—that anglers "know" can affect the bite. Even if you made two casts with the same lure to the same spot with identical retrieves but with different colors and got bit on the second cast, you could not conclude changing color made the fish bite. The fish may have just repositioned in the spot. Or maybe it took two casts to trip the fish's trigger.

But when the rewards of catching fish are on the line, the absence of scientific proof can be secondary. A modification of the fishing process that may improve catches without hindering them may be worth a try. ■

**In-Fisherman* Field Editor Dr. Hal Schramm is retired from a 40-year career in fisheries research and education. An avid angler, he contributes to all In-Fisherman publications on a variety of topics on fishing and fishery management and conservation.

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Marine Scene

BY **JOEL NELSON***

World's Best Fillet Knives

Excluding electric-powered versions, there's not much modern about modern fillet knives. But therein lies the beauty of a fixed-blade system. Simple in design with no batteries to drain or charge, and no cord to tether you to a hard-wired power source, a skillful angler armed with only a sharp blade can fillet supper in short order. Formerly the only and highly effective option for cleaning your catch, the standard-issue fixed-blade system is still the choice of millions of anglers who prefer the control and precision that an old classic provides.

That's not to say that there aren't new wrinkles and updates to a proven system, and that old knowledge can't be rehashed and shared again. Increasingly, as new ways and means are layered on top of aged ones, tried and true advice can be lost in the shuffle. What was formerly common knowledge is uncommon in fish camps and resorts that may no longer have as many old-timers in cleaning-houses as they used to.

Rapala

It makes sense to start with the number-one selling fillet knife in history. To share the story of the Rapala knife is to speak of the Finnish company, Marttiini, who partnered with Rapala over 50 years ago. You know the one—yellow birch handle, tanned leather sheath, comes with a sharpener, and likely the first fillet knife that many of us had every seen. Marttiini sold Rapala 20,000 knives, and Rapala soon found a strong market for the knife here in the states, mostly because of the combination of value, effectiveness, and easily resharpened blade.

»**The Rapala Soft Grip Fillet knife utilizes the legendary Rapala flexible blade used in the ever-popular Fish 'n Fillet model.**

CEO at Marttiini, Päivi Ohvo, explains a bit about the materials: "We use both German and French stainless steel," he says. "It's very close to 420 steel and has exactly the right hardness for fillet knives. More important than the material is the right sharpening at the factory. That's the secret."

Senior Product Manager at Rapala, Bart Rosen, also sings praise for the steel used in the knife. Known to him and many others as the FNF (Fish 'n Fillet) knife, he says, "The steel we use is key to the whole series. It's hard enough to take the edge that's hand-ground at the factory, but forgiving enough to be sharpened by anyone. A sharpener comes with the knife, so anglers can touch up the blade easily, at any point in the filleting process."

Other high-quality materials are a big part of the knife and its design, according to Rosen. "They're full or thru-tang construction, meaning the knife blade comes down the entire length of the hande, offering better rigidity and strength. The blade itself has the perfect amount of flexibility, too, which is true for any of the lengths we offer it in. The 7.5-inch is still the most popular, but there's 4-, 6-, and 9-inch models too, for whatever species of fish you clean."

The original Fish 'n Fillet model and the soft-grip series both feature the same blade, with the newer versions offering a bit better grip and an even better value. "These knives are really quality, and yet affordable for everyone," Rosen says. "It's a fillet knife that you can keep a spare of at the cabin or in the boat. It's a great option that anyone can use, and everyone loves."

Everyone, too, has a story of their own, like the knife I inherited from my grandfather after seeing it roll around in the bottom of an old Lund boat for decades, then back to the fish-cleaning shack to fillet buckets of 'gills and crappies. *In-Fisherman* Editor Doug Stange has a story, too:

"I've had one of those Rapala knives I got in about 1970, soon broke the tip off of it, so it was relegated to cutbait duty in my cat bag. It was there for 20 years when I lost the knife in shallow water on the Minnesota River one night getting out of the boat on a sandbar to fish for flathead catfish. I went back and fished the same sandbar two years later to film with Toad

Smith, got out of the boat, felt something below my foot, and it was the knife, still in the sheath. Now I've had it in my cat bag for another 30 years."

»Steven Tedford custom-makes fillet knives with a delicate hand to get the flex just right and expertise to harden and temper the blade for maximum sharpness and edge retention.

A "Nicer" Knife

Over the years of filleting fish, it occurred to several of my relatives that I probably needed something a little "nicer." So there were some upgrades over the years that involved different brands, harder steel, and certainly some more decorative options. Rapala sells one of them, but I was most impressed with a knife I actually bought myself, the Leech Lake fillet knife. Anyone who visited a Midwest sport show in the 1980s or '90s saw Don or Glory Canney offering customers a look at a true beauty. The colorful, hard-laminated wood handle and ridiculously sharp blade was something you feared as much as you prized.

Don and Glory have both passed on, but I talked with the Arnold family of Reeds Family Outdoor Outfitters who continue to sell the knives through the Canney's son, Mike. With the Reeds store Walker location being on the shore of Minnesota's Leech Lake, there's still a demand for the knife, says Drew Arnold, one of the owners of Reeds. "Don was the mayor of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, for two-plus decades, but had a cabin on Kabekona bay on Leech Lake," Arnold says. "He traveled the Midwest sportshow circuit and sold across the aisle from my dad Jeff. He'd have a crowd that always gathered around to watch him sharpen a new or old knife for free with the belt-sander he brought, and he would always hand out a Band-Aid with every knife he sharpened."

I didn't know that story or the lineage of the knife I bought from their booth sometime in the late 1990s. I just knew it cleaned fish really well, required very little or no sharpening, and I could get it retouched at least once a year at the Northwest Sports Show—that is, until I left it for less than an hour at a busy fish-cleaning shack in northern Minnesota. When I returned, I found all of the old resort knives still there, but mine, gone to whoever found it there after me. The resort owner promised to keep an eye out, but we both knew that it was probably gone for good. I got several good years out of it, but a hundred bucks or so was hard to come by back then, so it was a big loss. Yet, I'm guessing it's still cleaning fish somewhere, so there's at least some solace these days.

The Bleeding Edge

For those that keep better care of their things than I did then, there's much to discuss. Custom knife makers have for years offered blades that are a cut above standard offerings, much like the Leech Lake knife. Yet today, custom means more than just handcrafted, it means total control of the design input and a bevy of knife features within reason. It's an opportunity to get a customized sheath, colored handle of varying look or feel, but also the chance to start from the ground up with the very best raw materials.

I talked with Steven Tedford of Steven Tedford Knives, a custom knife maker in south-central Ontario. He offered some serious enlightenment when it came to anything knife related, with over 1,000 hand-made fillet knives to his credit over the years.

Tedford: "The perfect fillet knife requires a mix of hardness and flexibility. It should be able to be turned upon itself nearly 90 degrees without breaking, but the flex needs to be progressive out toward the tip where you really need it. If it's a quality knife, it should be resharpened with multiple levels of sanding, starting with 200 grit and getting finer as you go. Most of the cheaper knives become dull, even after a few fillets."

Tedford goes on to share that knives made with quality steel, and properly sharpened, hold their "hone" for hundreds of fish, even years on end. "I think it's the most important part of a quality knife," he says. "You need super-hard steel to hold a hone, and cheap steel simply can't hold it. Again, if you can hand-sharpen a knife with a few swipes of a sander or other sharpening system, the steel is too soft, and you'll never experience what a truly sharp knife can do."

All Steel Ain't the Same

Again, we turn to Tedford: "I build knives out of only two materials—440 C stainless or high-carbon steel." He explained the strong suits of both, noting that 440 C stainless doesn't rust, which is an attractive feature for something that's often wet. "The 440 C stainless is a steel many people prefer because it simply needs less care," he says. "It holds an edge great, won't rust, and charter captains or others that fillet hundreds of fish a month love the maintenance-free aspect. Original versions keep a good hone, but the chromium and vanadium in them are not heat treatable. Those components take away from the sharpness a bit, and for a knife-maker, the material is harder to work with. That makes the cost go through the roof."

Tedford says he could probably retire on making just fillet knives, but all of his favorite designs are made of high-carbon steel. "It's a throwback to thousands of years of metallurgy," he says. "Sure, it will rust and patina, but high-carbon steel is still the gold-standard for a perfect, sharp-edged hone because of its hardness."

Tedord started collecting knives at a young age, noticing even then that not all steels were equal. "I noticed as a kid that all the pre-1950s knives I saw at shows still had their original edges," he says. "They were sharp, gunmetal gray knives that seemed just a higher quality."

Tedford says the market is flooded now with cheaper steel from China and other places that don't reflect the steel of yesteryear. "German steel has long been prized for its purity and hardness, but I've seen some cheaper versions from there recently," he says. "Japanese steel, on the other hand, comes from different craftsmanship. The Japanese utilize the deba, a short, heavy chef-style knife for filleting fish, and stay very traditional with both their style and quality of steel."

Which Knife?

So much in the fixed-blade fillet knife market comes down to how much you'd like to spend. There's little question that custom knife-makers like Tedford offer a superior product, but depending on design, length, and materials, it could set you back anywhere from $250 to $400. Still, it's a different product from a production-style piece that you're meant to have several of. A custom piece is a lifetime knife, and true treasures to serious anglers. Tedford: "I don't want price to be a huge deterrent, so I look to make them affordable for people that are serious about a custom piece. That includes lifetime free sharpening, and a stake in the design and hand-manufacturing literally as the knife is being created. I charge the same whether the customer stops by to offer feedback and is close to the build or is not." It's an opportunity to craft literally the perfect knife for you.

But what is the ultimate fillet knife? Tedford: "It's sharp above all else, holds an edge for years, but has a custom flexibility and hardness, depending on the application. Make no mistake about it, the ultimate panfish fillet knife might not be the perfect walleye knife, and vice versa.

"King salmon, for example, don't necessarily require removal of the skin, so they can be a firmer flex. That helps with cutting thicker bones when needed. Some folks don't like flexibility, and feel that overly flexible blades can 'float' and miss meat. They prefer accuracy above all else. Others really want it to be comfortable and beautiful above all else, so it's nice to be able to provide a product that's customized for the fit, function, and feel of each angler."

For this angler, it's nice to have a few. I treasure the fancier blades to do the heavy lifting, but rely on cheaper options in the truck, boat, and fish house. So much so, that my boys learned to cut fishing line with a knife long before they could find a scissors, snips, or nail clipper. So maybe the ultimate knife is the one you use, there when you need it, wherever that may be. If you're a homebody that lives where you fish exclusively, it would be nice to have the one knife that rules them all. Maybe someday. ■

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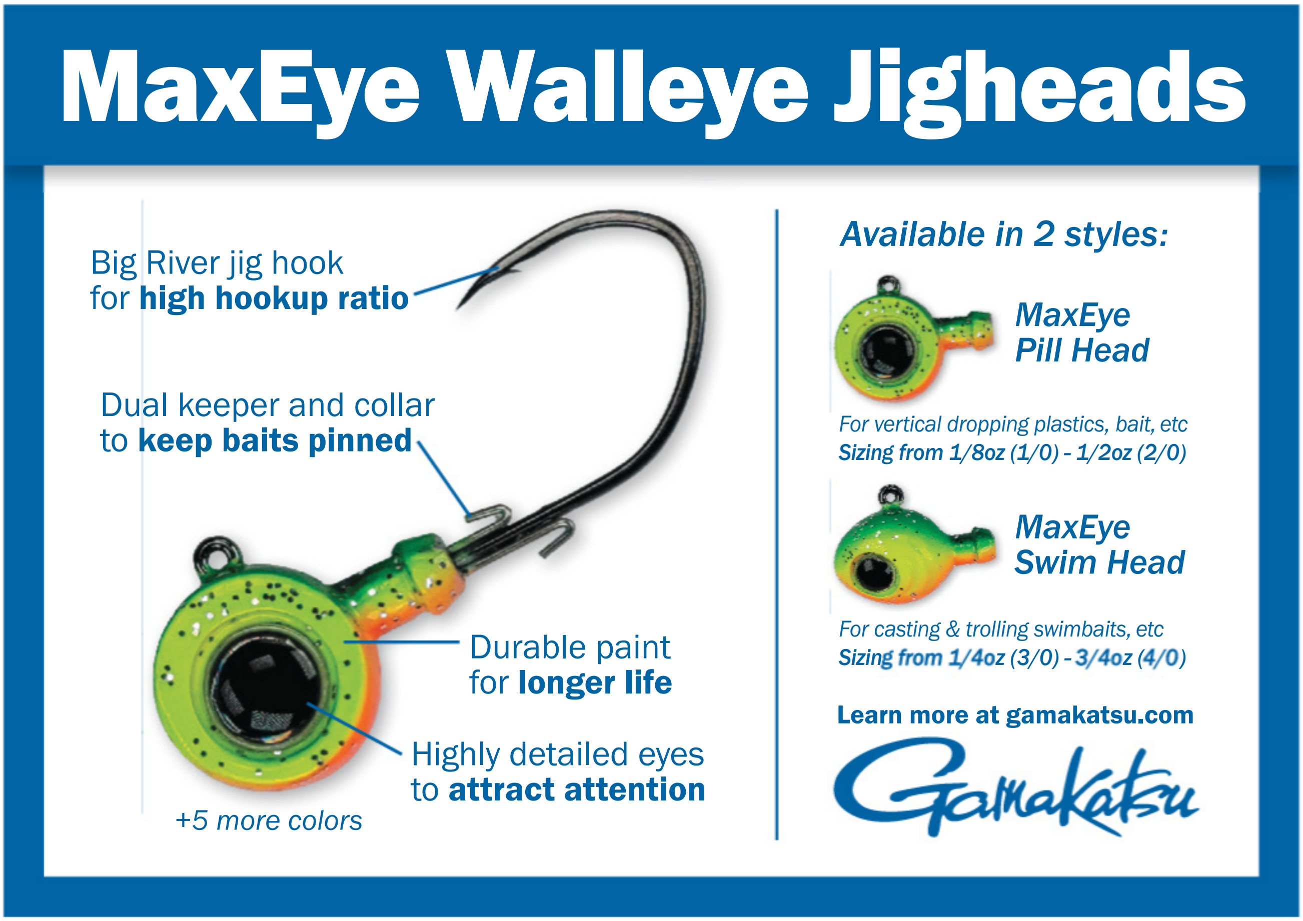
*Joel Nelson, Cannon Falls, Minnesota, is a frequent and longtime contributor to In-Fisherman publications, and an excellent angler and technical writer.



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Screen Scene

BY **THOMAS ALLEN**

A Case for 2D Sonar

Welcome to Screen Scene, a new regular column in *In-Fisherman* magazine that focuses on electronics. Screen Scene will serve as a classroom whiteboard to illustrate basic understanding, advanced settings, and applications of electronics to help you find, identify, and catch more fish. In addition to appearing as a regular column, you might occasionally see elements of Screen Scene as a part of select feature articles where additional discussion of electronics applications support the topic at hand.

As we traverse through these sonar-related subjects, you'll note that various brands have different terms for similar or same technologies. Humminbird's Side Imaging, Lowrance's SideScan, and Garmin's Side-Vü, for example, all reference side-viewing sonar, but their applications and settings options inside those operating systems are generally the same. Part of our goal is to help clarify those seemingly muddled waters.

Sure, you catch fish without electronics on your boat or on the ice, but there's little argument to be made that disqualifies how productive anglers can become after embracing and effectively utilizing modern electronics. It takes commitment and a desire to learn to remain current, but most of all it takes seat time—and who's going to complain about that? So let's jump right in.

Changing by the Day

By now, we're several versions deep into live sonar and it seems to be a mainstay among the tournament ranks and recreational anglers alike. But with the changes to current live platforms within the Garmin, Humminbird, and Lowrance families, so has advanced the quality of 2D sonar. It's better than ever.

Some say that the advancing of live technology has seemingly cast a shadow on "lesser" technologies—an erroneous assumption, indeed. Don't be fooled—you need 2D to be as productive as possible.

Before we discuss a few specific applications, let's talk about some important settings adjustments. Becoming knowledgeable with 2D or any modern technology includes how to navigate menu options and quickly adjust settings to fit your preferences and current fishing conditions.

Frequency: Hertz (Hz) is a unit of frequency equivalent to one cycle per second, and sonar frequency—the number of pulses sent out from the transducer per second—is generally measured in kilohertz (kHz) (1,000 Hz is one KHz). As sound pulses are emitted, echos are returned, and the unit processes this information to create a sounding—or image—on your unit's screen. Sonar cone width is a part of this discussion, too. (Think of an upside-down ice cream cone beginning at the transducer and getting wider as it looks into the depths.) Lower frequency means a wider cone with greater bottom

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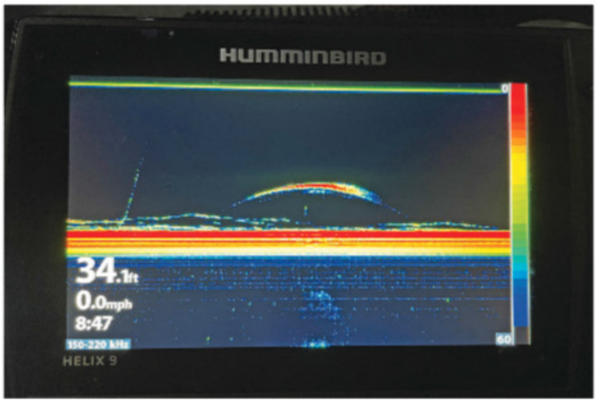
SOLIX 12
SIMMS



»Learn to identify structure and fish by how a mark is positioned compared to the boat's motion. This picture is of a sturgeon on a river while anchored. The fish's head is facing upstream, indicating a possible travel route or feeding pattern.

coverage, and a higher frequency means a narrower cone with higher detail and lesser bottom coverage. Most modern units offer multiple options from 50 kHz up to a 200 kHz beam.

For improved detail (target separation) and increased resolution, a higher-frequency selection is worth trying, but your field of view will be limited because the cone width is smaller—often the best option for deep water. In general, both for ice-fishing and open-water fishing, a lower frequency is likely best in shallow water, say 10 feet and under.

Sensitivity and Contrast: These are two settings adjustments you should regularly work with, especially from lake to lake. Also, when switching between frequencies, you may need to adjust the contrast and/or sensitivity to maximize the quality of your image—the two settings together can provide several viewing options. If you select a higher frequency in deeper water, increasing the contrast might return a crisper image. However, the images might indicate more debris in the water column, thus creating more clutter on your screen. Perhaps decreasing the sensitivity in this case, especially if you're fishing in relatively dirty water, might generate the best image. But by default, these adjustments may also reduce resolution of actual fish and vegetation. It's a give and take. Experiment to produce the highest level of information return.

Chart Speed: Chart speed adjustments are made to accommodate the speed at which the boat is moving. If you have a 2D transducer mounted on the back of the pad beneath the boat or in a through-hull position, you can effectively use 2D sonar while at speed. There is a point, however, where the boat may be moving too quickly—25 to 30 mph is about the maximum speed to run while relying on 2D sonar. If you plan to scout for schools of fish at speed, you'll want the chart speed maxed out; just know image quality won't be as high of resolution as it would be at a slower chart speed.

If using 2D sonar while ice fishing, or trolling at 1 to 2 mph, a slow chart speed makes the most sense. Just recognize that clarity and target separation will be more discernible at slower chart speeds. Adjusting sensitivity and contrast at different chart speeds may return the best image with the most information.

Direction and Motion

The more information you can garner, the more productive your time on the water will be—the very essence of utilizing modern electronics. Being able to determine which way the fish are facing or traveling can be accomplished by understanding the perspective your transducer is producing. If the fish is large enough, for example, such as sturgeon, paddlefish, muskies, and stripers, you can often determine which end is the head and which is the tail.

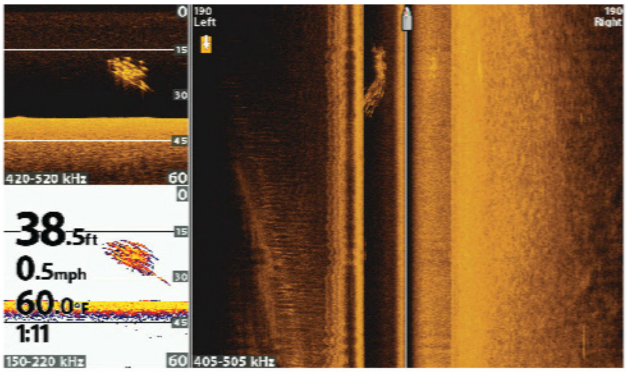
Years ago, I was on a paddlefish expedition and my guide clued me into a fascinating use of 2D sonar on his Lowrance HDS 12. Based on the formation of the mark returned by his transducer on his screen, he could tell if the fish was not only a paddlefish, but whether it was a female or male. In the case of a female fish, the brighter color near the belly of the fish was its roe. He proved it to me on several occasions.

When looking at your screen, the far right-hand side of it shows the most current information from directly below the boat (from the most recent sonar returns). Therefore, if a large fish's head is facing to the right, you can assume the fish is swimming toward the front of, or generally in the same direction, as the boat. If the marks are angled upward to the right, you can assume the fish are rising in the water column, and conversely, if the marks are angled down and to the right, the fish are descending—likely in reaction to your approaching boat. All valuable information that should impact your next move.

Also consider adjusting the color palette to a preferred color combination based on the harshness of the ambient light. There's even a night mode that's easy on the eyes once the sun sets. Users can also maintain or remove the depth lines, and adjust the primary readouts, including water depth, water temperature, boat speed, and local time.

2D On-The-Water

There are many fishing techniques where 2D sonar shines, but they require adjustments to maximize information output. Again, there's no substitute for time on the water. If making minor adjustments to existing facets of the 2D technology is intermediate, incorporating



»Note the angle of the school of fish in the bottom left of this screen, down and to the right, perhaps indicative of a reaction to the boat.

the sonar into specific fishing techniques is certainly an advanced skill to hone.

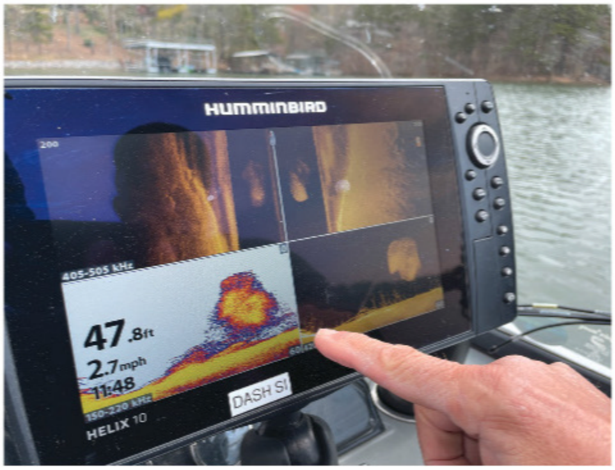
Drop-Shot: Implementing 2D sonar into your drop-shotting routine will take an already effective presentation and make it deadly. Consider first, that your trolling motor either features a built-in 2D sonar transducer or has one strapped to the trolling-motor head. In your unit's menu settings, select the 200-kHz setting, increase your contrast, and reduce sensitivity until you can see both the drop-shot weight and bait as it falls and reaches the bottom.

If you see a fish suspended above the bait, simply raise it to face-level with the suspended fish. The results will speak for themselves.

It's critical to keep the bait directly beneath the transducer because recall that the cone at higher frequencies is not as wide as a lower frequency. A useful feature of 2D sonar in this situation is it shows a history, thus illustrating something of a pattern of how fish are responding to your rig. Adapt to those encounters. Learning how to master this application while ice fishing is a very effective method before putting it to work on open water with a drop-shot.

Marking At Speed: Whether searching for submerged timber in southern reservoirs, schools of baitfish, deep weededges in northern natural lakes, or schools of suspended feeding walleyes in the Great Lakes, being able to cover water quickly is key to making the most efficient use of your time. The position of the transducer is the most important part here; if it's out of the water or covered in bubbles while the boat is on plane, it won't produce accurate returns.

For our purpose, the transducer meant to provide 2D information needs to be in clean water at all times, and the best spot for this is at the rear of the pad. The other option is with a through-hull transducer, which only works on a fiberglass hull. The largest benefit here is the ability to cover a lot of water, looking for a target and eliminating unproductive water quickly.



»Splitting your screen to accommodate a couple technologies at one time will help further identify exactly what you're looking at. Here you can see a school of baitfish that are staged above some weeds or stumps.

Comparative Screening: While the proper use of 2D sonar is a critical skill to master, cross referencing that information with side- and down-viewing sonars only increases the amount of information you have at your fingertips. I keep 2D on my graphs almost always, but in a split-screen viewing platform to compare what I'm seeing in a couple other views.

Having an array of technologies available in a couple locations on your rig provides a tremendous amount of information that contributes to solving the puzzle. And it's not exclusive to just bass fishing or just walleye fishing—it applies across the board. And that's why you need 2D sonar. ■

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FREEDOM

BY **MATT STRAW***

Nuanced Ned Rigging

Few things have taken the angling world by storm like the unimposing Ned rig. For a decade or so, the Ned rig spread through the bass fishing world like wildfire. If you haven't heard of it, you've likely been in a coma or imprisoned in a foreign land.

Named for the originator—retired University of Kansas archivist and *In-Fisherman* Field Editor Ned Kehde—Ned rigs blast off with practically every pro at every level of competition in every tournament held in North America. Kevin VanDam used one to help him win on the St. Lawrence in 2017.

Which is when Ott DeFoe, B.A.S.S. Elite pro and star of Outdoor Channel's "The Hunt For Monster Bass," weighed in his first bass caught on a Ned rig. DeFoe made several YouTube videos on Ned rigs, admitting he caught his biggest bass in a Texas tournament with one, and should have started fishing it long before he did.

It's been around longer than you think. The Ned rig had its origins in the 1950s, according to Kehde. "Chuck Woods of Kansas City created the Beetle in the 1950s—a byproduct of his days of using a jigworm, such as the Sportsman's Super Floater," Kehde said. "He shortened soft-plastic worms, creating stick-style baits that ranged from 1 to 3 inches, and affixed them onto a jig. Eventually, Virgil and Bill Ward of Bass Buster Lure Company manufactured the famous Beetle Spin. We used the Beetle without the spinner on 1/16- to 1/8-ounce jigs, and fished with it the same way we fish Ned rigs today.

"Harold Ensley of Kansas City used it to win the 1960 World Series of Fishing. Guido Hibdon and I used to fish with Ensley in the late 1960s, and he introduced us to the effectiveness of a jigworm. Thus, in our historical vision, they were precursors to the Senko or stickworm.

"Mar Lynn Lure Company of Blue Springs, Missouri, began making the Skworm-N-Worm in 1956—a jigworm rig," he said. "As those worms tattered, we used pieces 2¾ to 3 inches long on a jig. We used the posterior and anterior sections of these worms—another precursor. The first time we used a Yamamoto Senko was in 2002. We cut 5-inchers in half to get two pieces 2½ inches long and fixed them to unpainted Gopher Mushroom Head Jigs. In 2004, we switched to YUM Dingers and 2½-inch Yum Wooly Beaver Tails on 1/16-ounce Gopher Heads."

After almost 80 years, why did Midwest finesse suddenly catch fire coast-to-coast? "I don't why it became so popular all across the U.S. and other nations," Kehde said. "It dates back to the 1950s—way before the anglers out west and in Japan became finesse anglers. Social media played a big role in the spread of Midwest finesse. One reason it became popular is that from September of 2011 to November of 2020, we published hundreds of thousands of words each year about it."

»Legendary Kansas Angler Ned Kehde, originator of the Ned rig, has written volumes on Midwest Finesse fishing.

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Which ignores the obvious: The Ned rig caught fire because it flat-out scorches bass of all species, in all environments, North to South, East to West, almost every day, no matter what conditions prevail. But, for most of us—including DeFoe prior to 2017—catching big bass on such a small, subtle bait with practically zero tail action all season long seemed counterintuitive. (What does it resemble? A TRD. Z-Man humor.)

My take on Midwest finesse success is twofold: Bass in every mood—inactive, neutral or active—will snarf a low-action peanut, but inactive and neutral bass are less likely to hit aggressive presentations like big spinnerbaits and cranks. Second, bass have seen increasing pressure every year for decades. Pressured bass, active or not, are more likely to inhale a light, low-action jig-plastic combo. Many popular lures and rigs are too aggressive for pressured and less active bass, which seem to become increasingly wary of spinning, augering, thumping, blurping, chattering lures every year.

"I can execute retrieves with more finesse by wielding a short rod than I can with a long one," Kehde says. "With 10-pound braid, which has the diameter of 4-pound-test monofilament, and a 5-foot, 8-pound-test fluorocarbon leader I can implement these retrieves more effectively than I can accomplish when my spinning reels are spooled with either 6- or 8-pound-test monofilament or fluorocarbon."

But, recently, Kehde discovered presentation and feel improved with even lighter lines and leaders.

Tackle And Presentation

Kehde and I have gone back-and-forth about rod length for years. He's devoted to rods 6-feet long or shorter. Steelhead and trout-fishing roots led me in the opposite direction. I find short rods really uncomfortable to work with, preferring 7½- to 8-foot sticks for most bass-fishing tactics. But he's the Ned part of the Ned rig and what do I know? I'm just a word bender.

"A light jighead lies at the heart of the six Midwest finesse presentations—(1) swim, glide, and shake; (2) hop and bounce; (3) drag and deadstick; (4) straight swim; (5) drag and incessant shake; (6) strolling (pulling Ned rigs with the trolling motor or while drifting)," Kehde said. "Newcomers tend not to realize the effectiveness of light jigs. They're more focused on making long casts rather than alluring and subtle presentations."

Until recently, Z-Man 1/16-ounce ShroomZ and OG Mushroom Jigs have been Kehde's bread-and-butter, but—like Ant Man—he's headed for the quantum realm. Z-Man introduced Micro Finesse BaitZ—five new shapes including the Micro TRD and Micro LarvaZ (both 1.75 inches). Basically panfish and trout baits, but I'm definitely trying the Shad FryZ for bass in cold water, when they behave more like panfish. To present these mighty mites, Z-Man introduced the Z-Man Micro Finesse ShroomZ jigs in 1/30- to 1/10-ounce sizes. Kehde came across tackle to fish them with.

"I've replaced the rods, reels, and lines I used to employ," he said. "On October 26, 2022, Drew Reese, veteran of the first Bassmaster Classic, presented me with 5-foot 6-inch and 5-foot 10-inch light-power prototypes of Drew's Rods that Z-Man Fishing Products will manufacture and make available in the spring of 2023. These rods

»Midwest-finesse afficionado Drew Reese designed a new lineup of Drew's Ned Rig rods for Z-Man.

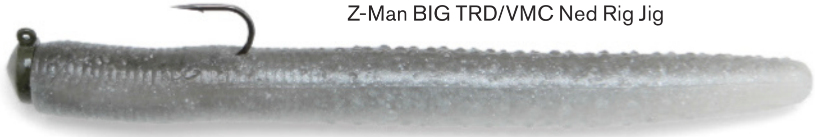
Z-MAN
NRS 10ML
5'10" MEDIUM LIGHT POWER
DREW'S

Z-Man Shad FryZ/Z-Man Micro Finesse ShroomZ Jig

Z-Man Finesse TRD/ VMC Ned Rig Jig

Z-Man Micro TRD/Z-Man Micro Finesse ShroomZ Jig

Z-Man Micro LarvaZ/Z-Man Micro Finesse ShroomZ Jig



Z-Man BIG TRD/VMC Ned Rig Jig

»*In-Fisherman* **Field Editor Matt Straw with a Minnesota-finesse largemouth. Straw has been refining his finesse tactics for bass, particularly smallmouths, for decades.**

are lighter and more delightful than Drew's original models, which were as light as the proverbial feather.

"What's more, I often described the way I fish with spinning tackle as 'no-feel fishing,'" Kehde added. "I couldn't feel most strikes or what my rigs were doing during retrieves with 8-pound braid and 5-foot, 8-pound fluorocarbon leaders. Drew's rods and the lighter new Daiwa Ballistic spinning reels spooled with 4-pound-test braid improved my sense of feel. These extremely light rods, reels, and lines filled our fishing days last year with the most joy and fun we've ever experienced on the water."

Kehde and crew find they can Midwest finesse their way around dense weeds with the new gear. "These new outfits allowed us to make more effective presentations with an assortment of lightweight Midwest finesse baits affixed to 1/32-ounce mushroom heads," he said. "We employ these with swim-glide-and-shake presentations or drag-shake-and-deadstick presentations around patches of coontail and sago and curly-leaf pondweeds. Four-pound-test Berkley FireLine is amazingly effective in vegetation.

"During the late summer and fall of 2022, lightweight jigs allowed us to effectively fish around massive wads of filamentous algae, which are usually very trying environments to fish," Kehde added. "We used to avoid them. But last year, there were several outings when we tangled with 18 to 25 largemouths an hour on a massive shallow-water flat in the back of a large feeder-creek arm that was choked in places with algae."

DeFoe first experienced Ned rig fishing with Kehde at a press gig and was impressed at how many bass were being caught in the back of the boat. But DeFoe went on to fish Ned rigs with a 7-foot 1-inch, medium-power rod with 10-pound braid and 8-pound fluorocarbon leaders, using simple lift-drop retrieves on bottom. Kehde, he said, often avoids bottom contact altogether.

"I start with the 4-inch TRD, on the 1/16-ounce VMC Ned Rig Jig," DeFoe says on YouTube. "If it's a heavy-pressure deal, I cut it back 2 to 2½ inches. It comes through rocks surprisingly well. When following up after catching bass on shallow spots, the Ned rig is an excellent one-two punch."

But what does he know? His name isn't Ned and he only wins and earns millions by fishing for bass all year long. (You want to be him.) ■

**In-Fisherman* Field Editor and National Fresh Water Fishing hall-of-famer Matt Straw has been writing about bass, often on finesse-fishing topics, for In-Fisherman publications for over three decades.

2022 Angler of the Year
Brandon Palaniuk
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MAYBE YOU SHOULD TOO
HOT SHOT MINNOW
ADRENALINE CRAW
X ZONE™ PRO SERIES LURES

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/ **NEW For 2023**, we've extended the casting lineup—adding a 7'6" MH/MF Swim Jig model and 7'3" MH/MF Light Jig/Ocho model.

SCAN TO LEARN MORE ABOUT LEW'S SIGNATURE SERIES RODS

BY **DR. HAL SCHRAMM***

To Juice or Not to Juice

Searching for Facts on Fish Attractants

Fish attractants—often called scents, which is a misnomer because they can be detected by both the senses of taste and smell—are hardly new. In 1956, Mann's Bait Company introduced the Jelly Worm, a soft, supple plastic worm that still holds a prominent place in the market. The worm was offered in numerous colors, and some were scented to match the color—blue smelled like blueberries, red smelled like strawberries, purple smelled like grape, and black smelled like licorice (anise). No bass diet studies have ever revealed that bass eat fruits or licorice. Did the scents matter? Jelly Worms have caught, and continue to catch, thousands of bass, including Paul Elias' all-time high 132-pound 4-day, 5-fish-limit tournament weight at Falcon Lake in 2008.

Maybe the scents weren't attractants but rather helped mask a repellant scent. Salmon are repelled by the amino acid L-serine, which is released from the skin of bears foraging on salmon in streams. That would convey survival advantage to migrating salmon, but bass aren't salmon and rarely encounter bears. Human skin also releases L-serine (and many other amino acids and organic molecules), but according to Dr. Keith Jones, bass find L-serine moderately attractive. Para-aminobenzoic acid (PABA), which occurs naturally in the human body and was used in sunscreen (now banned) to block ultraviolet light, and the chemical DEET in insecticides are powerful repellants. To my knowledge, no one has looked to see whether so-called chemical attractants can mask a repellant, but oil-based compounds may mask some of these repellants by essentially sealing them to the bait.

Many anglers have used attractants for years, and numerous softbait manufacturers incorporate attractants into their products. Plain and simple: do they work?

Bass' Senses of Taste and Smell

Both the senses of taste and smell are based on receptor cells, each binding a specific or a small suite of chemically similar molecules. A receptor with a bound molecule then sends a signal to the brain. The receptors for smell are located in the numerous folds of tissue in the nostrils on the top of the head; the receptors for taste are in the lining of the mouth. All the chemicals that bind to receptors and trigger a taste or smell are water soluble and generally small molecules; some amino acids, which are the building blocks of muscle and mucus proteins, are very effective at binding with specific receptors; but other organic and inorganic molecules also trigger smell and taste. Bass can smell and taste sugars, salts, alcohols, acids, bitter substances, and many environmental pollutants, usually at concentrations well below human detection levels. They have the same taste sensations as humans: sweet, salty, sour, and bitter.

The receptors do the smelling and tasting; the brain integrates the input from the multiple receptors and determines whether the smells or tastes are attractive, neutral, or repulsive. What matters more for bass in detecting an acceptable bait: smell or taste?

BAIT FUEL
NETBAIT
NETBAIT
BAIT FUEL

That's a tough question, but I don't think it's an important one. First, the concept of a scent trail doesn't apply to the way anglers fish for bass. Bass are attracted to forage or a lure from a distance by visual, water movement, and sound stimuli. Chemicals are for close range, accept/reject decisions. An attractant dispersed in the water may be detected by smell, but keep in mind that a bass is constantly pulling water from the environment into the mouth and pumping it over the gills to obtain oxygen; thus, taste can be involved even for a lure outside the mouth. Lure retention, however, will be determined by the sense of taste.

Lots of Options

There are plenty of brands of attractants and soft-plastic lures containing attractants. I reached out to all companies listed in online retailers that provided contact information and obtained information from all who responded to phone calls or emails. I asked how the product was developed or what was in it and how it was tested. As you will see, there is more than one way to attract a bass or make a lure tasty.

BANG LURES
BANG
BANG LURES

BANG—Gambler Baits brought BANG to market in the 1980s. The product originally used oils from shrimp and crawfish and then was expanded to included extracts from shad and menhaden, according to Robin Shiver, president of Bass Assassin Lures, Inc. The spray attractant is also available in crawfish, garlic, and shad scents. BANG was purchased by Bass Assassin Lures and is incorporated into their soft-plastic baits. Bassmaster Elite Series pro Cliff Prince, who admits that nothing works all the time, has found that BANG attractant ups his catch.

BaitFuel—BaitFuel is available as a fish-attracting gel that can be applied to any bait, and the dry component of BaitFuel is blended into the plastic of NetBait lures. Both products are manufactured by American Baitworks. According to the company's Matt Massey, the goal was to get a strong attractant effect with as few chemicals as possible. American Baitworks contracted with recognized fish physiologist Dr. Bruce Tufts at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, in 2020 to achieve that goal.

Tufts began with a thorough search of the biological literature across a broad spectrum of fishes to identify individual chemical compounds found to be feeding stimulants. Promising compounds were infused into agar (a jelly-like substance that releases water-soluble chemicals but itself is not a feeding attractant) pellets to test the feeding response of largemouth bass in the lab. Tests recorded which mixtures were ingested and how long they were retained. The testing process can be viewed at *youtube.com/watch?v=2BRs63peWPk*.

The present formulation of BaitFuel is the mixture that gave the maximal feeding response after 5,200 feeding trials that tested varying concentrations and combinations of candidate compounds. The next step was incorporating the water-soluble chemical mixture into soft-plastic baits, a process complicated because the heat needed to liquify the plastic alters the attractant molecules. The feeding trials were then repeated to dial in the right amount of BaitFuel to add to each bait. Is it effective? Tufts is an avid angler, regularly competing in St. Lawrence River bass tournaments. "I wouldn't fish without it," Tufts said, and then added, "Although we have developed an effective product, for sure this is not the end of the road."

Big Bite Baits—Bite Juice has always been cooked into Big Bite Baits or availabe in a packet. The new Scentsation bait lineup was developed in response to their pro staffers asking for something stronger, particularly for northern smallmouths, according the company president Tammy Foshee. The Scentsation product is more expensive because of the scent and the reformulated plastic necessary to hold the scent yet remain supple. "This stuff really stinks, and it tastes as bad as it smells. I now use scissors if I need to shorten a bait a little," says Major League Fishing pro and two-time angler of the year Michael Neal who used the Scentsation SoMolly for a third-place finish at the Mille Lacs MLF Pro Tour in September, 2022. Do they work? Neal described a test he conducted in the St. Lawrence River. He drifted a ledge with a Big Bite Baits lure with the original Bite Juice without a bite. He made the same drift with the Scentsation version of the lure and caught smallmouths and continually had gobies pecking the lure.

BIG BITE BAITS
SCENTSATION

Chompers—Chompers makes garlic and anise spray attractants and they add garlic and salt to many of their soft-plastic baits. The same liquid in the spray is added to the baits after they are poured. Chompers owner Aaron Click explained that the spray is made of food-grade

From Mono to MaxScent:

The Development of Fish-Attractant Softbaits at Berkley.

An interview with Keith Jones and Brent Southworth

Berkley
PowerBait
Fish Hold on 18X Longer
NEW NOUVEAU
Gulp!
PowerBait MaxScent
12 CT
15 CT

It was the early 1980s. Fish attractants, which were beginning to cause a little stir in the sportfishing industry, captured the attention of a young Tom Bedell, president of Berkley who wanted to expand the tackle company started by his father Berkley Bedell. He envisioned soft-plastic baits infused with fish-attracting chemicals. Berkley didn't make soft-plastic baits at the time, and they had no biological research facilities. Berkley designed a lab to develop and test fish attractants and hired Dr. Keith Jones to run the facility. Of course, testing requires fish. Initially Berkley worked in collaboration with Iowa DNR to use their hatchery facilities in the off season. The program quickly expanded, and by 1990 Berkley had developed a sophisticated laboratory and their own tank system including a large testing tank.

Jones started with a blank slate, armed only with his educational background and training in fish biology and sensory physiology and personal knowledge as an angler of what might work for other anglers. He focused on taste and tested a bunch of species; Bedell's goal was to develop baits for a wide range of sportfish. Initial tests involved selection tests of cotton pellets saturated with "scents" like garlic, anise, salt, and sugar. Pellets that were taken into the mouth and held—some even swallowed—were recorded as "palatable;" how long the pellets were held was recorded. Pellets that were not ingested or held only briefly were recorded as negative or neutral tastes.

The next step, following the same selection protocol, tested extracts of actual animal prey, such as earthworms, crayfish, shad, and minnows. It was quickly apparent to Jones that the preferred "meat" differed among species; bass, for example, preferred different extracts than trout or panfish. But common to all the effective extracts was that they were rich in proteins. Further testing identified specific compounds that, when added to the animal extract, produced a supercharged attractant.

The next step was to make soft-plastic fishing baits containing the attractant. Jones could not disclose how this was done; but this was a major challenge because making soft-plastic baits requires heat, and heat denatures proteins, the fundamental ingredient that Jones found attracts fish. After the chemical engineers had worked their magic, the final products—the actual baits—were tested for effectiveness in lab tanks and in the field. The result was PowerBait.

Jones and his team continued to work toward the goal of an attractant so appealing that it worked all the time, even at great dilutions. They were constantly tweaking formulations, but the next leap was Gulp!. Fish have to chew or crush PowerBait to get the scent. Gulp! is a water-based bait that rapidly disperses the attractant and creates a larger dispersion window that can now be detected by both taste and smell. The rate of dispersion was measured with water-soluble dyes visible in the water.

The next rung on Berkley's scented-baits ladder was PowerBait MaxScent. Jones retired a couple years into this project and was succeeded by Brent Southworth, who worked with Jones for several years before his retirement. Southworth explained that getting to MaxScent involved more taste testing, new combinations of attractants (species specific), and making the baits from a different PVC material that allowed more of the water-based attractant to be infused into the plastic and to be more quickly dispersed.

Southworth is an avid angler, so I pressed him on field testing. Berkley relies on their pro staff using and providing feedback about the products, but Southworth described the initial field tests for bass as comparing the bite rates on simple, straight-tailed worms with and without MaxScent. In other words, after taking lure action out of the equation, MaxScent worms caught more bass than the same do-nothing worms without MaxScent attractant.

garlic mixed into an oil base. I challenged Click about fish being only able to detect water-soluble compounds. He agreed and responded that the oil is a carrier that allows the attractant to absorb into the plastisol. After the oil dissipates from the bait (a new bait out of the package or one freshly sprayed will form a little oil slick when it hits the water), the smell and taste remains.

Chompers
Chompers
Chompers
Chompers
Chompers
G

Click considers the garlic a crawfish scent and is most effective on crawfish-imitating baits; the anise scent is for use on moving baits. Do they work? Click lives on Missouri's Meramec River and fishes almost daily. "When two anglers—one fishing with Chompers Formula G and one without—cast into a school of smallmouths that you can easily see in the clear water and the fish swim to the Chompers bait, you have to think the attractant works," he says. Double-blind fishing experiments conducted by pro anglers also support his conclusion.

Pautzke Fire Gel—This attractant is available in a smorgasbord of flavors, several of which are effective for bass. The fish attractant is formulated into a super sticky gel that remains on a bait and remains stinky all day long.

PAUTZKE FIRE GEL BASS
PAUTZKE FIRE GEL SHAD
PAUTZKE FIRE GEL GARLIC
PAUTZKE FIRE GEL CRAWFISH

Chris Shaffer, Pautzke Bait Company director of operations, explains that the fish scents are made from fish oils. When I challenged him that fish can only detect water-soluble molecules, he pointed out that different sources of fish oils have different effectiveness.

Major League Fishing bass pro Jared Lintner has used Fire Gel with success, citing examples of getting bites fishing around and behind his fellow competitors who weren't getting bit or watching bass on forward-facing sonar that were avoiding a drop-shot become attracted after Fire Gel was applied to his bait. Lintner acknowledged that he doesn't use the attractant all the time, but it is a tool for turning neutral fish into biters. He also matches the scent to the situation; for example, using the shad scent during the shad spawn.

PRO-CURE
CRAWFISH
SUPER GEL
MONSTER BASS
Baitmax

Pro-Cure—Available in several flavors, Pro-Cure can be applied to any bait. Steve Lynch, vice president of sales and marketing, explained that Pro-Cure starts with ground bait, to which is added a food-grade stabilizer and a bite stimulant. The bite stimulant consists of a combination of amino acids; the recipe was purchased from Canadian fish farmers who had done research to develop a feeding stimulant. In the aquaculture business, if fish aren't feeding they aren't growing; and if the fish aren't growing, you're not making money. In separate tests, Pro-Cure infused the bite stimulant into pellets and found they readily attracted bass. Although not citing specific tests of their products, Lynch noted that seven out of ten users of Pro-Cure are charter captains.

YUM—YUM (Pradco Outdoor Brands) began selling F2 attractant and soft-plastic baits infused with the attractants in the early 2000s. Formerly Riverside Baits, the soft baits were rebranded to YUM when the F2 attractant was added. As other companies, reformulation of the plastic was necessary to incorporate the scents and maintain softness. Although no one presently at Pradco worked there when F2 was developed, Chad Warner, product director at Pradco, was able to determine that the F2 attractant was developed by an independent scientist who formerly worked as a flavor specialist in the human food industry. F2 was tested for effectiveness as a feeding attractant at Mississippi State University. Unfortunately, I was unable to track down the now-retired scientist who tested the product at Mississippi State, but Warner reported that the product was found effective on bass.

So … Do Attractants Work?

Every year, millions of bass are caught on "unscented" soft-plastic baits, so it's easy to conclude that attractants don't matter. But the reigning Bassmaster Classic champ and YUM pro-staffer Jason Christie offers this: "I make a living catching bass. One bite can change a day, a tournament, or even a year; every little thing a guy can do helps." Christie's expertise with LiveScope has taught him that bass respond to a bait by attacking, turning away, or—most commonly—tracking it. "This is where scent can only help."

Five of the top-10 anglers in the Major League Fishing Pro Tour September 2022 Mille Lacs tournament used scented baits to catch smallmouths. That doesn't say anything at all about the effectiveness of scented baits, but it suggests scented baits may be used more in northern waters and for smallmouths. I asked MLF angler Michael Neal, who catches bass—both brown and green—all over the country, whether the effect of scented baits is a largemouth vs. smallmouth thing, or maybe a north vs. south thing.

"Not really," Neal replied. "When the water is clear (greater than 2-feet visibility), and a finesse approach is appropriate or anytime you are fishing a bait where the fish swim up and inspect it, I think scent matters. But other factors like line size also matters. Confidence is always the deal." I would add that in clear water, bass are first and foremost visual predators; I would be surprised that any kind of chemical attractant will make a bass bite a lure that does not already have visual appeal—the right shape, color, action, and speed—and fished in the right part of the water column. And, of course, bass need to be present.

The effectiveness of the products included in this article are supported by apparently credible evidence, in a few cases by rigorous lab testing, for others by field testing by accomplished bass anglers. There are other products not included that may be effective. But there are some products—or at least some ingredients touted by some products— that, based on present knowledge of fish sensory physiology, are unlikely candidates. For example, products that rely on fish oils would not be detected by taste or smell receptors; but compounds in fish oils that may be water soluble may make fish oils, especially if not refined, effective. Products claiming to contain pheromones as bite stimulants are questionable because pheromones are generally species-specific (or restricted to a small number of similar species) means of chemical communication, and there are no known feeding pheromones. An alarm chemical (Schreckstoff) released from wounded minnows triggers feeding by pike, but to my knowledge this has not been demonstrated for bass. Nevertheless, chemically identifying and synthesizing pheromone or Schreckstoff molecules would cost millions of dollars.

To juice or not to juice? The only way to know is to try attractants or attractant-infused baits where you fish and draw your own conclusion. ■

**In-Fisherman* Field Editor Dr. Hal Schramm is retired from a 40-year career in fisheries research and education. An avid angler, he contributes to all In-Fisherman publications on a variety of topics on fishing and fishery science and management.

BY GLENN WALKER*

Playbook Patterns for Springtime River Bass

River bass fishing can be a Jekyll and Hyde type deal. One day you catch a boat load of bass that are in all stages of the spawn and in all sizes. The next day you struggle to get a bite. Weather, moon phase, current, and water levels all can change by the minute, affecting what the bass are doing and thus affecting the bite. To help curb the days when you struggle to get a bite, here are three common river bass patterns that will likely always come into play.

Bladed Jigs & Trailers

Fishing a bladed jig up shallow around cover is primarily what it was designed to do, so this is where this lure category shines. I use a 1/4- or 3/8-ounce bladed jig when I'm targeting bass in lily pads or around laydowns. A steady retrieve producing a consistent vibration and action of the lure and soft-plastic trailer is often all that's needed to trigger a strike, but sometimes varying your retrieve pattern can be the ticket.

The Z-Man Jack Hammer is my go-to bladed jig, and I match it with a variety of softbait trailers. A key regarding trailers is you don't want its action to overpower or counteract the already powerful action of the jig's vibrating blade. When rigged on a bladed jig, different types of soft-plastic baits have their own unique action and how they affect performance of the bladed jig. The trailer I choose depends on water depth, type and density of cover, and the forage I'm trying to mimic. Here are some of my observations and suggestions on trailers:

Swimbaits: With the flash from the blade and the action of a swimbait tail, this combination excels when targeting bass feeding on shad. The Zaku from Gary Yamamoto Custom Baits is a good option in this category. It's slight side-to-side action coupled with the pulse and action from the blade on the Jack Hammer is a winning combination. Select swimbait size to match the weight of your vibrating jig and the size of baitfish bass are feeding

Z-Man Jack Hammer

on. When you rig the trailer, make sure it's rigged straight so the bait runs true. I find nothing deters bass from eating a bladed jig more than when it's running wonky.

Grubs: I like to use either a splittail spinnerbait trailer or a single-tail grub when bass want a compact lure offering, or when I'm fishing around thick cover, as it's less likely to get fouled.

Craws: A bladed jig with a craw-imitating softbait can attract crayfish-hungry bass. A trailer like the Zoom UV Speed Craw has a compact profile, and when used in the correct color, can also mimic the action of baitfish. Slow-rolling a heavier bladed jig with a soft-plastic craw along a riprap bank or mud cutbank is a great way to imitate craws scurrying along the bottom there.

Flipping Cover

Flipping is one of the best ways fish for river bass in cover, for example, when bass are set up around stumps to spawn, tucked in behind laydowns to ambush baitfish, or on riprap to feed on crawfish. And bass can use these cover types throughout spring, repositioning on it based on current, food, and where they are in the spawning process. Being aware of current and how cover is set up in a given area helps you determine where bass will be positioned in the cover.

I use two flipping presentations during the spring for river bass, one being a skirted jig when I'm fishing deeper water or if I want to drag my bait off a ledge into deeper water. For this duty, I always have a 1/2-ounce black and blue All-Terrain Tackle A.T. jig ready to go. If I'm working shallow brush or vegetation such as lily pad stalks, I prefer a soft-plastic creature bait or craw Texas-rigged with a TroKar TK133 Pro V Flippin' Hook and 7/16-ounce tungsten sinker.

All-Terrain Tackle
A.T. Jig
Berkley PowerBait MaxScent
Chigger Craw Texas-rigged
on an Eagle Claw Trokar
Flippin' Hook.

When bass are moving into areas to spawn, key flipping spots include flooded timber islands, riprap banks, or mud cutbanks. When bass are close to spawning or when they're spawning, the best flipping spots can often be found in backwater lakes with flooded stumps or emergent lily pad stems.

Topwater Scenarios

Fishing a topwater lure during the spring accomplishes several things: attracts bass' attention; mimics activity in the shallows, which in the spring could mean baitfish or bluegills spawning; and can aggravate bass into biting.

One of my favorite topwaters for river bass in early season is a buzzbait. It's a great choice when fishing around submerged and emergent vegetation, and by speeding up or slowing down your retrieve you can change the action of a buzzbait. They're great search lures for determining where bass are positioned on cover. Casts parallel to cover keep your bait in productive areas.

»Buzzbaits are hard to beat for springtime river bass holding around cover.

Choosing buzzbait weight depends on the activity level of bass, how far you need to cast, and what bass are feeding on. Most of the time I use a 3/8-ounce buzzbait in white, black, or the War Eagle Buzz Toad in Grey Ghost. But if bass are feeding on smaller baitfish or insects, I downsize to a 1/4-ounce size. If I need to make long casts and present a buzzbait with a larger profile, I go with a 1/2-ounce size.

I fish buzzbaits on a 7-foot medium-heavy Witch Doctor Tackle Shaman rod with a high-speed gear ratio reel so I can quickly get the buzzbait on top of the water. I spool with 40-pound Seaguar Smackdown braided line in Stealth Gray.

Hollow-body frogs excel when vegetation becomes matted during the summer and into fall, but they also can be great options during the early season. One such spring scenario is when there's a rise in water level. Rising water floods prime fish-holding cover, and a frog is an effective and often the best way, to cover water quickly in these areas. Often, a combination of grass and sticks accumulates along the shoreline, along with floating gunk that the high water has collected and pushed up into the shallows. In these situations, a bass could literally be hiding anywhere, so I opt for a large-profile frog to get the bass' attention. I like Snag Proof Bobby's Perfect Frog in Brown Bullfrog, as this frog's size and color profile resembles the large native frogs that would be lurking in the shallows.

Bobby's
Perfect Frog

Another scenario in which hollow-bodied frogs excel during early season is when bass are bedded under heavy cover or positioned under an overhanging tree or under a boat. When bass are on beds, they're looking to defend it, so a topwater frog poses a threat to a bedding bass. Because you can put hollow-bodied frogs in places other baits can't go, frogs make for a great option in these situations.

I fish frogs on a 6-foot 10-inch, heavy Witch Doctor Tackle Shaman rod. I can walk-the-dog and make casts in tight quarters with this rod. I match it with a high-speed gear-ratio reel so I can quickly pick up slack in my line, which for frog-fishing I use 65-pound Seaguar Smackdown braid in Stealth Gray.

Rapala X-Rap Prop

If bass are shallow and moving around or keying on bluegill beds, a prop bait is an excellent topwater choice. It can be cast far to spooky bass, and you can speed up or slow down your retrieve to match bass activity level. Once you have a bass interested in the bait, pause it and then give it small twitches to engage the props. It'll send bass through the ceiling.

Fishing with a prop bait like a Rapala X-Rap Prop, you can also get bedding bass to come up to surface. Sometimes they won't commit to eating your lure, but now you know where they're bedded and can target them with a more precise presentation.

I fish prop baits on a similar setup for buzzbaits, except I use a 7-foot, medium Witch Doctor Tackle Shaman cranking rod, as I want a little bit more rod give when a fish wants to run with the treble hooks in their mouth.

As you're getting your gear ready for a river bass trip this season, keep these three springtime patterns in your playbook. ■

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*Glenn Walker has been fishing tournaments for over 20 years, spreading his passion and knowledge of the sport via articles and videos. Check *glennwalkerfishing.com*, and GlennWalkerFishing on Facebook and Instagram.

» The author with a dandy river backwater bass.

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BY **JIM GRONAW***

Kayak Savvy for River Smallmouths

I he sport of smallmouth bass fishing there are scenarios and situations that hold t own special charm. Some anglers like deep, clear lakes with schooling fish far from shore. O ers prefer strong, swirling currents and giant eddies of larger river systems. But for me, few a ing adventures offer the peace, beauty, and excitement of a meandering creek, shrouded by , maples, and sycamores, with the promise of a 3-pound smallmouth just around the next bend. To me, it's kayak bassing in its purist form.

Many of the untold numbers of smallmouth creeks in our nation are miniature versions of larger river systems, with riffle-pool habitats punctuated by occasional long, deep stretches. Many can be fished effectively by wading, but kayaking can reach more isolated stretches that you can't get to on foot. Launch points may be few and far between, and access often limited. But it's these smaller fisheries where smallmouths and kayaks merge that can make for one glorious experience.

From early March until the chilling winds of November, creek smallmouths are available to millions of anglers nationwide. Some waters yield a bounty of spotted bass and largemouths, too. All spawn in the spring and then settle into summer patterns. Fall sees an uptick in bass activity and may be the best season of all to be on the water for both beauty and fish. Regardless of season, a few tips and tactics will connect you with more bronzebacks from a kayak.

Color Matters

In my region, we're blessed with Atlantic-slope rivers rich in creek bass opportunities. The James, Shenandoah, Upper Potomac, and Susquehanna rivers and their tributaries can provide a lifetime of bass fishing. Most anglers have their favorite lure colors, which can come and go. Red has been a recent hot color on smaller crankbaits, hair jigs, and soft plastics. Red, along with orange and olive, have always been front-runners for regional bass anglers, but the the invasive rusty crayfish (*Orconectes rusticus*)—a larger, more aggressive crayfish species with expanding populations in Ohio River drainages and beyond—has emerged as a dominant crayfish species and has bass seeing red.

Compared to native crayfish, the rusty grows larger, and adults usually outgrow the forage size preferred by even adult-sized smallmouths. Their coloration, per their namesake, is a deep-rust to reddish

RIVERSIDE
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P127

River Kayak Options

Timmy Dixon, owner/operator of New River Outdoor Adventures in Galax, Virginia, has been fishing the smallmouth-rich New River in Southwest Virginia for 30-plus years, the last 8 mostly from a kayak. He shares what traits he looks for most in a kayak geared toward river fishing.

"Comfort and stability," he says. In an increasingly specialized market, he finds these are two building blocks to maximizing enjoyment on the water. "I want to feel safe if I have to lean to either side," he says. "And I want to be comfortable. After fishing for eight hours, I want to be able to stand up and step out and feel fresh as a daisy."

If you encounter Dixon on the water, you'll find him in his Bonafide SS127. He's tried many different models, but he says the SS has a no-nonsense, angler-friendly design he craves. The 12-foot 7-inch footprint gives him ample room up front to fish and for tackle storage. He's added an electric motor to cover more water, and an accessories box behind the seat to keeps rods and tackle organized.

A few more select kayak options for river fishing:

Bonafide RVR119: The 11-foot 9-inch hull (35-inch beam) has a drop-skeg system—deploy the skeg to track straight across flat water and retract it for quick response and maneuverability in rivers. The kick-rocker shape in the bow provides efficient up-river attainments. Loaded with storage and features like quiet anchor bow retraction and stern drag-chain channels, removable sonar pod system, and more. *bonafidefishing.com*

Old Town Sportsman BigWater PDL 132: A bigger footprint at 13 feet 2 inches, the BigWater PDL is a good option for big rivers as its hull is designed for open-water efficiency while offering stability when you're on your feet. The PDL drive allows for easy docking and is backed by a 5-year warranty. Plenty of storage is available in the sealed bow hatch, under the seat, or in the rear tank well. *oldtowncanoe.com*

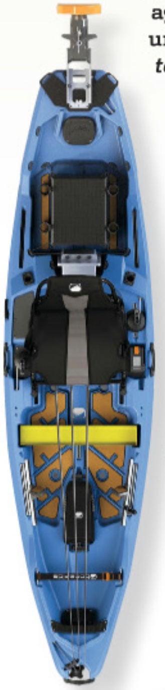
»Timmy Dixon hoists a hefty New River kayak smallmouth.

Native Watercraft Slayer Propel 10: Compact enough (10 feet) to fit in the bed of a pickup truck, the Slayer Propel 10 is a nimble boat equipped with features typically found on bigger kayaks. Getting around is easy with the Propel Pedal Drive System (with forward and reverse) and storage is plentiful either in the bow or under the seat. Groove tracks allow for add-ons, and the stern rudder is recessed to allow for impact-free steering. *nativewatercraft.com*

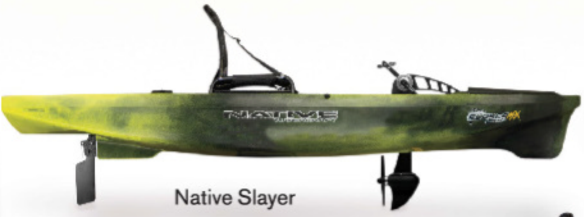
Jackson Kayak Coosa X: Designed specifically for river anglers, the hull on this 11-foot 8-inch model was built with more volume in the bow to better handle moving water and even rapids. A wide-open deck makes for a more stable fishing platform and integrated storage tubes keep rods from getting tangled in low-hanging branches or banging off boulders. TriTrak systems also allow for nearly endless gearing solutions. *jacksonkayak.com*

NRS Pike: This inflatable, lightweight (48 pounds) kayak combines a high-pressure 4-inch drop-stitch deck and 10.5-inch side tubes to create a stable platform to sit or stand. Portable (comes with a carry bag), the 12-foot 8-inch Pike features bow and stern attachment points plus additional bungee rigging, EVA foam deck pad to protect agains hooks and snags, integrated fish measuring board, aluminum-frame suspended-mesh elevated seat, accessory mounts, pump, and more. *nrs.com*

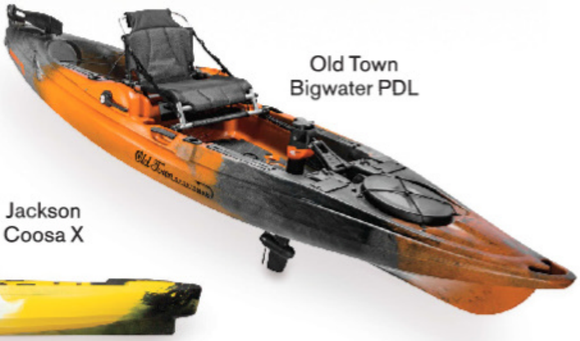
In-Fisherman



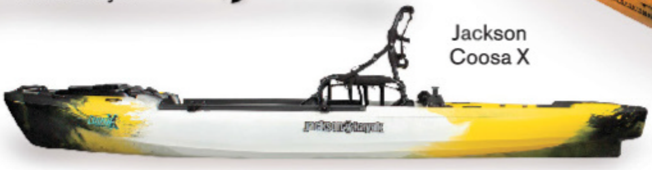
Bonafide RVR



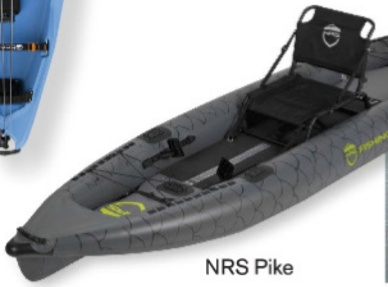
Native Slayer



Old Town Bigwater PDL



Jackson Coosa X



NRS Pike

Coming Soon!

It's all kayak fishing—rigging, reviews, tactics, denstinations, and much more! Pick up a copy of ***Kayak Fishing Fun***, available on newsstands starting April 11. You can also order a copy at *osgnewsstand.com*.

Two for the Box

When I'm fishing small rivers for smallmouths, two lure categories—tubes and jerkbaits—maximize efficieny on the water, depending on the season, where fish are holding, and their mood.

As water temperatures begin to rise in the spring, I find tubes effective for dissecting river flats closest to wintering holes. While power-fishing is often used during this period, tubes can be the remedy to fooling finicky fish. They also can excel as the water warms and smallmouths become more active.

During the spring and any time the bite is tough, a 2.5-inch Tournament Gitzit Tube is a great finesse option. When fish are more active, I opt for larger tubes like the Strike King 3.5-inch Coffee Tube. I use the lightest jighead possible while still maintaining bottom contact. Focus on dark colors such as green pumpkin, watermelon, burnt orange, and brown.

At times I find jerkbaits the perfect tools to help break down a stretch of river and quickly eliminate unproductive water. In most cases, I like to match the size and color of a jerkbait to the forage present.

Strike King
Coffee Tube
Rapala
X-Rap

Jerkbaits also give you constant clues on the mood of fish. Sluggish fish often respond to slow retrieves and long pauses. Erratic and quick retrieves trigger aggressive fish.

During cold-water periods, successful jerkbait anglers are masters at utilizing long pauses during their retrieves. In these situations, I like the 2.5-inch Lucky Craft B Freeze 65 Long Bill Jerkbait. As smallmouths become more active, the 4¾-inch Rapala X-RAP XR12 is a dependable pick. Color-wise, a good rule of thumb is to "match the hatch." In dirty-water, however, don't rule out bolder colors.

**Kade Gewanter

hue. Smaller, younger rusty crayfish can be eaten by bass, but the larger, aggressive adults are left alone.

With rustys colonizing these creeks for 10 years or more, bass have learned to recognize the color red as either food or enemy. We've recently caught more and bigger creek bass using hair jigs with red plastic trailers or 3-inch red Yamamoto Senkos fished weedless than all other lures combined. Red lures were struck harder than other colors and we surmised it may be due the protective instincts of adult bass triggered by the color red.

Jud Larrimore, a longtime angling friend and smallmouth guru from Westminster, Maryland, has been a fan of red lures for many years but insists that the effectiveness of the color has increased over the past several seasons of kayaking on the Potomac and its tributaries. He uses red plastic trailers almost exclusively on his hair jigs he ties. Additionally, he tips an 1/8-ounce bladed jig with a 2-inch red Baby Shad grub from Bobby Garland as his trailer of choice.

When tossing smaller crankbaits like the classic Rebel Teeny Crayfish, Larrimore opts again for a deeper red tone, noting that it gets more strikes than the natural colors of native crayfish species. We've also found that after the spawn, red lures didn't always produce as well as during Prespawn to Spawn periods, and we would turn to various topwater and Ned rig options after spawning concluded.

Farther north in Maine, Ryan Lilly, Brand Evangelist for Old Town Watercraft, finds that Penobscot River smallmouths consistently favor white lures throughout the season. A veteran on many of Maine's top smallmouth flows, he says that a variety of baitfish species dominate the forage base and that white- or cream-colored baits catch most fish.

Lilly uses swimbaits like the Z-Man DieZel Minnow in 2 to 4 inches rigged on a 1/16- or 1/8-ounce VMC Finesse jig. Another one of his favorites is the Yamamoto Hula Grub or a 3- to 4-inch white fluke. During the smallmouth spawn, he also uses topwaters such as the Rapala Skitter V, to entice shallow bass.

Lighten Up

Tackle choice depends on the phsyical characteristics of the creek you're fishing, along with the size of the smallmouths you expect to encounter. In most smallmouth streams I've fished throughout the Mid-Atlantic, bass typically range from 15 to 18 inches, with 20-incher a personal-best catch for many. Light to medium-light spinning gear—depending on the type and amount of wood or rock cover—is enough to handle these fish and enjoy their sporting qualities. I use 6.5- to 7.5-foot light-power rods from the Fenwick Eagle or Shimano Panfish series. A sensitive tip to telegraph soft strikes on plastics and hair jigs is important. I like 1/16-ounce jigs but also use 1/32-ounce when shallow, finesse presentations are needed for spooky fish in low or clear water.

For reels, I like 1000- and 2000-size Lew's Speed Spin as a durable option when navigating tight confines and heavy canopied stretches of smaller rivers and creeks from a kayak. They hold plenty of line, and my braid of choice is 10-pound Yo-Zuri Super Braid or 8- or 10-pound Power Pro in green. I attach a 3-foot, 8- or 10-pound fluorocarbon or clear mono leader. Fluorocarbon holds up better in rocky situations, while the mono leader seems to work best in shallow, clear conditions. Some deeper, boulder-strewn creeks may call for stronger and more abrasion-resistent lines. Braids from 15- to 20-pound test and leaders to 14-pound may be needed where excessive snags or toothy predators or big catfish are present.

Mid-Atlantic smallmouth sharpie Barry Pierson, from Mount Airy, Maryland, has been kayaking the Upper Potomac and Monocacy rivers, and North and South forks of the Shenandoah River for many years. His YouTube channel shows simple and effective Ned rig tactics for quality smallmouths in those systems. Using light, sensitive tackle, he can usually catch a couple dozen bigger fish per trip, with an occasional giant. His favorite finesse presentation is a Z-Man 2.75-inch

»Ryan Lilly's preferred platform for river smallmouths is the Old Town Sportsman Autopilot.

TRD on a 1/32-ounce Mule Jig Mushroom Head made by Ethan Dhyvetter of Michigan. Pierson says the slow fall rate and near-buoyant qualities of this presentation drives smallmouths crazy.

Shady Situations

Shade certainly plays a large role in smallmouth location during the postspawn through summer in creeks. Prespawn bass also often use shade to their advantage prior to nesting. A common situation in summer are smallmouths holding in the shadows of boulders, fallen logs, or shade lines cast by streamside trees. These are classic ambush spots. Even before the water hits 60°F, stream bass seek darker areas to overtake unsuspecting minnows, crayfish, or sunfish. On a bright, sunny day, some bass move shallow to enjoy the warming of a few degrees. Often the larger adults stay in shaded, deeper pockets.

I used to believe that cloud cover and rain was the kiss of death for early season creek smallmouths, but that all changed on a mid-April trip with Larrimore. A cloudy, windy pre-front day, rain was in the forecast, and the air was several degrees warmer than the water. Over a four-hour period of on-and-off rain and heavy cloud cover, we caught over 70 smallmouths on hair jigs from a variety of habitats.

The barometric pressure dropped significantly with the incoming front. Larrimore pointed out that the approaching rainfall and warmer air compared to the water temps would be key in triggering a good bite. As long as the rain wasn't excessive and didn't cause a substantial rise in water level, he felt confident in a hot bite. This overcast, low-pressure scenario made for one of the more memorable kayak bassing trips I've experienced.

Slow Down, Fish Thoroughly

A kayak gets you to that dynamite-looking stretch of water, but how many big smallmouths have we missed in prime stretches because we've floated through an area too quickly? Slowing down and fishing these areas thoroughly is key to tapping more fish. Lilly, for instance, uses the Spot-Lock feature on his Minn Kota-motor-equipped Old Town Sportsman AutoPilot kayak to maintain position to thoroughly fish productive-looking stretches of his beloved Penobscot River. Tips and points of islands, larger eddies, and other locations can be fished effectively using GPS anchoring technology like Minn-Kota Spot-Lock. Auto-deploy spike anchors can hold you in place while you thoroughly fish productive spots.

Once you're kayak gets you there, beaching your boat and doing some wade-fishing can be a fine option to tapping into more bass. A gravel bar or sandbar offers an easy pull-out to serve as a temporary base while you stretch your legs fishing prime areas accessible on foot.

Longtime In-Fisherman Master Angler Award recipient Alvie Sickle, of Taneytown, Maryland, frequently uses his kayak to reach remote creek sections, where he often parks his kayak and wade-fishes. He's caught some of his biggest bass this way. His favorite, year-round lures include the Rebel Teeny Wee Crawfish, Rapala Floating Minnow, and 1.5-inch tubes on a 1/16-ounce jighead. He prefers brown, black, and orange tubes that mimic crayfish colors and occasionally opts for a River Critter hair jig, especially during summer and early fall.

Floating your favorite smallmouth creek is among the most fulfilling experiences in kayak fishing. Doesn't have to be complicated. A couple rods, some tackle and supplies, a snack—and your senses to take in the beauty and inspiration that small rivers and creeks offer. ■

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*Jim Gronaw, Westminster, Maryland, is an avid angler and frequent contributor to In-Fisherman publications. **Kade Gewanter is a marketing agency professional and freelance writer and has previously contributed to *In-Fisherman*.

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BY **STEVE RYAN***

Moore Panfish from a Kayak

Tactical Kayaking for Crappies, Bluegills & More

Catching panfish from a kayak is one of the purest and most rewarding pursuits in angling. In select areas it's the only way to access trophy panfish, due to motor restrictions or the lack of an improved boat ramp. In other settings, kayaks simply provide the most convenient or effective means of fooling discerning panfish that are constantly subjected to more intrusive angling pressure. By presenting a smaller footprint on the water, kayak anglers can watch their catch rates of big panfish increase significantly.

To get a guide's perspective on winning strategies for catching trophy panfish from kayaks, we turn to Tim Moore of Alton, New Hampshire. Stationed on Lake Winnipesaukee—the largest lake in New Hampshire at nearly 45,000 acres—Moore has access to trophy black crappies, bluegills, pumpkinseeds, and yellow perch. Although these species are available to kayakers anytime during open-water season, Moore favors the fall for the bulk of his guided kayaking trips.

Fishing is in Moore's blood and he feels an intimate connection with the water. His father's side of the family settled in the historic seaside city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, six generations ago. His grandmother grew up on the family fishing wharf, and he's been fishing his entire life.

Kayak Advantages

"I've been a licensed guide in New Hampshire since 2006 and started outfitting with kayaks sometime around 2011," Moore says. "At that time, I was getting a lot of positive responses to my social-media posts about fishing out of a canoe." Upon learning the nuances of guiding coastal waters from a canoe, versus providing kayaks to customers and allowing them to "control their own vessel," Moore instantly bought some kayaks for this new fishing venture.

"I recall the first time that I pushed off from shore in a kayak," Moore recalls. "It was one of those 'where have you been all my life moments.' There was just something about being so close to the waterline, having a smaller profile and being able to sneak

YETI
Old Town
PREDATOR PDL

»Guide Tim Moore finds kayaks provide several advantages that larger boats can't offer.

into small places that I couldn't do with a boat. I knew that it would allow me and my clients to fish differently and more effectively. To make certain that my clients were being provided the very best possible experience, I've devoted a considerable amount of time to testing and contributing to the design of kayaks.

"As such, I'm running a motorized Old Town Sportsman Autopilot 136 when guiding clients. This kayak is a fishing machine. At 37 inches wide, I can sit, stand, or even sit with my legs hanging off one side of the kayak. The stability is incredible. The Minn Kota motor with Spot-Lock and remote control is amazing. If I'm standing to get a better line of sight, I don't have to sit back down to maneuver the kayak. Being able to Spot-Lock and hold position allows me to dissect or fancast an area thoroughly. Equipped with a Humminbird Helix 9 with Side Imaging, I can scan a large section of the basin with each pass to locate schools of panfish and then sit on top of them with Spot-Lock. The trolling motor is also a good safety feature; if someone needs to get back to shore in a hurry, we can do so with ease.

"I also have several Old Town Bigwater 132 PDL kayaks. These are used by my clients. The Bigwater is extremely stable and comfortable, yet lighter and more intuitive for beginner kayakers. Within 15 minutes, guys who have never previously been in a kayak have mastered its operation. The Bigwater 132 PDL is the ultimate kayak for drift-fishing. Forward and reverse pedaling allows you to make slight adjustments to your drift line without the need to stop fishing. It's a relatively fast kayak and the bow design sheds chop that splashes over the bow on many other kayaks."

One the biggest advantages of the kayak is that you cast a smaller shadow and in turn spook fewer fish. This is especially true in spring when panfish are holding in shallower water or tight to cover. "I can get my kayaks into spots where a boat simply can't go," Moore says. "These fish are generally less pressured and will more readily take a bait on the first drop into the spot. Sitting close to the water and having a small profile, kayaks don't catch the wind like bigger boats do. This means greater boat control and more precise casts."

A good example would be when groups of bluegills and crappies are around beaver-dam complexes. "These dams occasionally have enough water on the backside that we can negotiate into with our kayaks," Moore says. "People fishing in boats on the outside of the dam will sometimes get frustrated with us getting back in there, but we're catching fish that they never would be able to from their boats. Being smaller and nimbler has its advantages. We can literally sit over the top of fish in tight cover and catch one after another without alerting them to our presence.

"My home waters of Lake Winnipesaukee are crystal clear. In fall, there may be a half dozen boats out there on the weekend chasing schools of crappies around the northern basin. Fish react negatively to that added pressure. By Sunday afternoon, boats may only get one drop on the school before it scatters or moves off. In kayaks, we disturb fish less, and they are less influenced by our presence. With side-imaging, I could relocate scattered fish in most instances, but that eats up time and fish become increasingly wary the more they get moved around. It's best to keep that stealth factor."

Panfish Presentation Plans

For black crappies that crack the 15-inch mark on Lake Winnipesaukee, Moore uses an 1/8-ounce Clam Drop Tg jighead rigged with a 2.5-inch paddletail, such as the Z-Man Slim SwimZ. These paddletail baits have been hot for him the last couple of years. Since the primary baitfish in Lake Winnipesaukee are 2-inch rainbow smelt, this presentation perfectly matches the crappies' natural forage.

"I drop a swimbait down where I'm marking schools of crappies and work it slightly above them," Moore says. "With a fast-action, light-powered rod, I'm anticipating the tap on the jig as I work through them. Braided line and other superlines are great for

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Modern fishing electronics have earned their spot in kayak fishing, and lightweight lithium batteries have come a long way over a short period, making the combination a perfect scenario for the kayaking angler. Space is limited inside the hull of any fishing kayak, so battery footprint and weight are critical to maximizing performance and staying powered up while not exhausting what little storage space might be available.

Keeping electronics and other accessories fully powered aboard your kayak has never been easier. Dakota Lithium has an extensive selection of lithium batteries that fit the bill for all kayak anglers. Options begin at 12V 10Ah (amp-hour), 12V 18Ah, 12V 23Ah, 12V 46Ah, and 12V 54Ah—all ideal for powering kayak gear. They also have an impressive list of trolling-motor battery options for kayaks, too. Find your batteries and learn more at *dakotalithium.com*.

sensitivity, but you risk pulling the hook out of the mouths of trophy crappies. For that reason, I prefer the slight stretch of 3-pound-test monofilament.

"The biggest crappies that I catch year after year are while casting and retrieving a jig-and-plastic combination, not just vertically jigging it while drifting. Cast the bait into the school. Let it sink on a semi-slack line to the bottom (sometimes crappies will strike the jig while it's sinking to bottom on the initial cast). Raise the jig above the school and let it sink again to the bottom. The biggest crappies always seem to hit the bait when it's falling. I like the Clam Drop Tg jigs as they counteract the tendency of plastic swimbaits to slow the fall rate of the jig."

These baits are also great for swimming adjacent to horizontal cover such as a dock, bridge, and swim platforms. Moore notes that mooring buoys can be great crappie attractors, with fish lining up directly under the thick ropes securing the buoys in place. In this situation, precise casts are critical and an anchoring approach makes more sense than drifting. Slowly pick apart this cover. Be careful not to snag in the cover, which can spook the school.

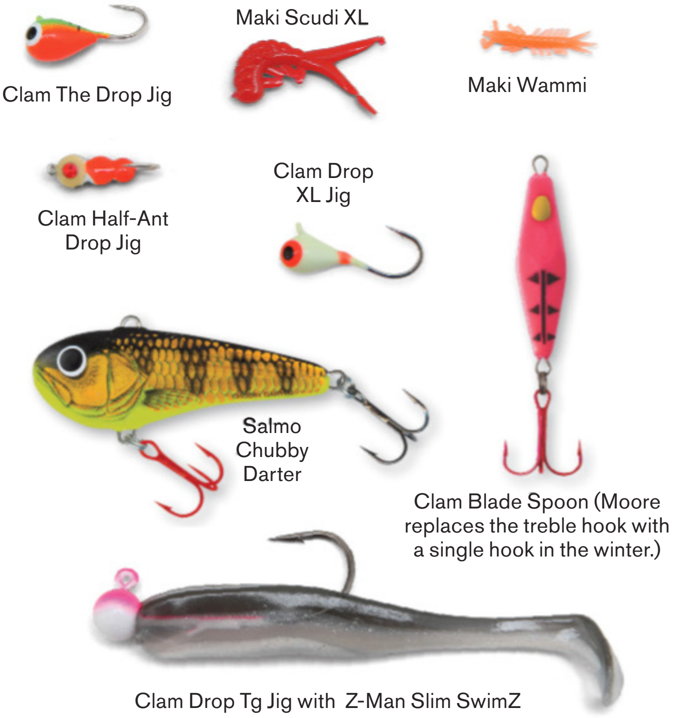
If a swimbait isn't producing, he takes on an ice-fishing approach and explores both ends of the lure size spectrum until he's cracked the panfish code for the day. At times, the biggest fish want a bigger bait. On those days, a lipless crankbait, such as Salmo Chubby Darter, can be the ticket. With its slower fall rate and more water displacement on both the rise and fall, it calls out for the attention from giant papermouths.

On other end of the size spectrum, he uses micro jig and plastic combos and simply hangs the bait in front of their face for as long as it takes to get a positive reaction. Consider this open-water deadsticking. As a last-ditch effort, he cycles through an array of different colors, but he puts more emphasis on size and action of his presentations.

To target big bluegills, Moore enjoys the quick-sinking properties and responsiveness of a Clam Blade Spoon. All of his Blade Spoons are rigged with single hooks to comply with winter regulations on the lake. This makes it easy to thread on an assortment of soft plastics, such as the Maki Scudi XL, Jamei, or Wammi. These baits resemble an insect or worm and have great action in the water. With the Blade Spoon, he can quickly drop through schools of suspended crappies and get down to trophy bluegills and pumpkinseeds that occasionally surpass the 10-inch mark.

Good electronics are critical in Moore's efforts to locate bluegills and yellow perch holding tight to the bottom. "When the plankton is so thick on the bottom of the lake, it takes the very best in target separation technology from your electronics to pick up those small blips that represent bottom hanging panfish," Moore explains. "At times, you can't hardly mark the fish, unless they raise a little farther off the bottom. It's then that I' break out my Clam ice fishing box with an assortment of tungsten jigs."

Moore's Lures



Clam The Drop Jig

Maki Scudi XL

Maki Wammi

Clam Half-Ant Drop Jig

Clam Drop XL Jig

Salmo Chubby Darter

Clam Blade Spoon (Moore replaces the treble hook with a single hook in the winter.)

Clam Drop Tg Jig with Z-Man Slim SwimZ

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A couple top producers for me are the Clam Drop and Half Ant Drop jigs. These jigs fish differently in the water. The Drop Jig is compact and orients horizontally in the water. This allows it to accommodate and deliver more action on plastics with extended tails and appendages. The Half Ant Drop hangs vertically in the water and presents a larger profile on its own, so it pairs nicely with smaller, more compact plastics. At times, panfish have a distinct preference for either a horizontally or vertically positioned bait. For this reason, it is important to pack and experiment with both styles on a daily basis.

Quiet, Organized, Efficient

One of the biggest things to be successful in a kayak is being organized and quiet. Moore is very aware of this and has plenty to say on the topic. "It's a plastic boat, so every time you set something down it pings and that sound resonates in the water," he says. "It not only spooks fish away from you but it also puts them on edge. They know that something isn't right. That makes them that much more difficult to catch. One of the major advantages of a kayak is stealth, and you're just shooting yourself in the foot by making excessive noise."

Speaking from my own kayaking experiences, my Yeti Rambler 20-ounce tumbler accompanies me on most of my excursions. With its stainless-steel construction, it makes noise each time you pick it up and set it back down in the kayak. For that reason, I wrap it in a silicone sleeve to suppress any noise. Consider doing something similar with anything you put into your kayak.

I also wear a Compass 360 Point Guide Wading Jacket to keep me dry and organized in the kayak. I prefer this style of jacket over a fishing vest because of its short waist-cut design, waterproof construction, snug-fit hood, tight seal neoprene cuffs, and perhaps most importantly, four large fleece-lined, front pockets for storing gear. When wearing a wading jacket or fishing vest, I suggest getting into the habit of always keeping items in the same designated pockets; for example, hemostats and cutters in the left top pocket, extra floats and leader material in the left bottom pocket, sunglasses in top right pocket, small tackle tray in bottom right pocket, or whatever system suits your needs. This saves you from digging through multiple pockets each time you need something.

Consider a small flybox or ice-fishing tackle box to keep panfish tackle organized. For years, my go-to panfish box has been the Plano compact side-by-side model #107000 tackle organizer. With up to 32 separate adjustable compartments in a package not much bigger than a wallet, this box is great for keeping small items organized—hooks, jigs, split shot, swivels, snaps, bobber stops, and more. Again, it's all about being organized, and not making extra noise digging around in the kayak to find commonly used items.

As with all kayaking endeavors, put a leash on anything you don't want getting lost to the depths. Pliers and line cutters are well suited to being attached to a retractable lanyard and secured to your person. At a minimum, fishing rods should be tethered when not in use. Better yet, affix enough flotation to each rod-and-reel combination to keep them from sinking should they inadvertently go overboard. The same goes for landing nets. Companies such as EGO now make floatable landing nets designed for kayaking and wading. The EGO Wade net comes with an elastic cord and clip that can be easily secured to your kayak. Using its floatable design, the net also doubles as a temporary holding tank for trophy panfish that you want to photograph prior to releasing.

No matter where you chase panfish, kayaks can give you an added advantage. They can get you to fish that others are unable to reach and keep you on top of fish undetected. With a bit of planning, rigging, and organization, a kayak can be your next perfect panfishing vessel. ■

PERCHZILLA

Guided Kayak Trips

Although most anglers keep their kayaking exploits close to home, several operators across the country and beyond offer guided kayaking trips for various trophy panfish. These can be incredibly peaceful and rewarding experiences. I've gone as far as Europe to fish from kayaks on a water supply reservoir in Spain that restricts the use of outboard motors. The lake just so happens to grow mammoth European redfin perch topping the 6-pound mark. Relying simply on your own manpower to navigate a large reservoir and then meticulously jigging the foundations of flooded buildings for trophy redfin perch the size of walleyes is surreal. Although the experience would be memorable from a boat, it's so much more special from a kayak.

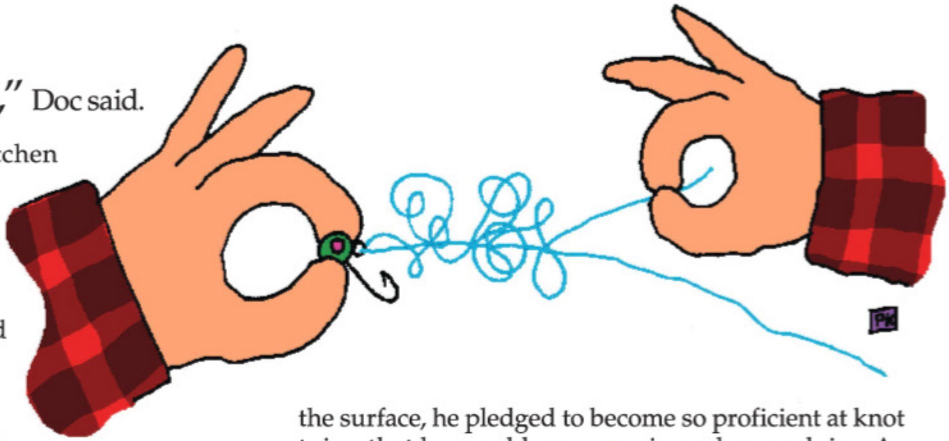
**In-Fisherman* Field Editor Steve Ryan is an accomplished multispecies angler and seeks trophy specimens from bank, boat, and kayak on waters large and small. He contributes to all In-Fisherman publications.

North with Doc

BY **GREG KNOWLES***

Illustrations by Peter Kohlsaat

Doc and the Ties That Bind



“That can’t be right,” Doc said.

Doc was sitting at the kitchen table in the cabin, examining the knot he’d laboriously finished tying with 6-pound-test line to a 1/4-ounce jig. It was a mess.

“Is that the new and improved pretzel knot I’ve heard so much about?” the banker said.

“My granddaughter can tie a stronger shoelace knot than that,” the policeman said, “and she’s only four.”

“I know! I know!” the kid said. “That’s one of those magician knots that comes undone when you blow on it.”

“You couldn’t pull a Kleenex out of the box with a knot that weak,” the attorney said. “What happens if a fish actually grabs the hook?”

“Doc,” I said, “Aunt Lucy ties a better knot in her Kiss The Cook apron.”

“I don’t do a lot of knot tying as a dentist,” Doc said. He lifted the line and the knot unwound like a string on a yo-yo, dropping the freed jig onto the table with a dull plop.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” the banker said.

Doc, understandably frustrated, said, “Just show me how to tie the Palomar, and I’ll be good.”

Unlike the rest of us, Doc typically fished once a year, one week a year, and that year, so long ago, I said, once again, “Thread the end through the eye, then put the end back through the eye to form a loop. You have the loop on one side and the double line with the end on the other. See that? Okay. Now tie a simple overhand knot...”

“A what?”

I grabbed a length of line and showed him.

“Okay, got it,” Doc said. “What now?”

“Keep the loop open. There you go. Drop the lure through the loop. Snug it up a little.”

“Like this?” Doc said.

“Good enough. Now wet the line. No! Don’t spit on it like you just ate a fly, you dummy. Put it in your mouth to wet it. Not the hook, just the knot. Okay, now pull it tight. Good boy. And trim off the excess.”

Doc grabbed a pair of clippers big enough to give a rhino a pedicure, and cut the knot completely off the line.

“Can you show me again?” Doc said. Later that week, after a cocktail big enough to float 18 olives on the surface, he pledged to become so proficient at knot tying that he would never again seek our advice. As chance would have it, he made good on that promise, and proved it during a memorable outing that included deliverance from what could have been a tragic outcome. Please allow me to elucidate.

The first week in June spun up on the calendar. A year, almost to the day, had passed since Doc’s knot-tying fiasco. We said our good-byes to Lars who runs Knobby’s out of Sioux Lookout, and an hour later the float plane skidded to a silky smooth landing on a remote lake on the Cat River chain. From the air we noticed the water was unusually high, but we’d fished high and sometimes fast water before, so no biggie.

Doc excused himself to go prep the boats while the rest of us stowed food and bedding, and stocked coolers. Twenty minutes later we opened rod cases and tackle boxes, affixed reels, poked lines through the rod guides, and tied on terminal tackle. We each readied two rigs, one for jigging, one for casting and trolling.

I was about to finish my jig rig when Doc walked in off the porch and said, “You guys gonna go fishing or sit in the cabin all day?”

I looked up, and Doc was at the door, two rods in one hand and his tackle box in the other.

“You’re always ready last,” the banker said. “What’s up?”

Doc said, “I learned to tie knots.”

“Let me see one,” the policeman said.

Doc showed him the baitcaster.

“Wait a minute. That’s not a Palomar.”

“While an excellent knot,” Doc said, “the very popular Palomar retains about 50 percent of line strength. I prefer the double five-turn uni-knot that retains nearly 100 percent.”

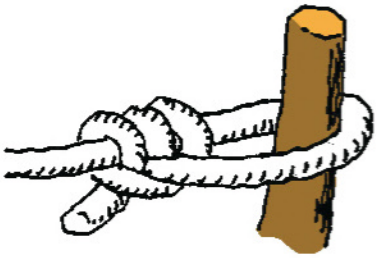
“What is this?” the kid said. “You turn into a knot snob?”

“Just did a little study, that’s all,” Doc said. “I discovered there’s a lot of science involved in knot tying, and it has become a lost art in today’s world of twist ties and Velcro.”

"Give us a while," the attorney said, "and we'll join you at the boats to see how your la-di-da knots compare to our low-rent tried-and-true ones."

When we finally trooped down to the lake, the first thing we noticed were the ropes that secured the boats to the dock. They didn't have the gnarled and messy look we expected. Each knot, tied with brand new half-inch poly rope, was identical.

The attorney watched Doc finish up the last knot, and said, "What's that called?"



"A taut-line hitch," Doc said. "Makes a strong connection that won't come undone under tension."

"Is that the same one you used to tie to the boats?" the policeman said.

"Nope," Doc said. "Since they will be untied often, I used two half hitches."

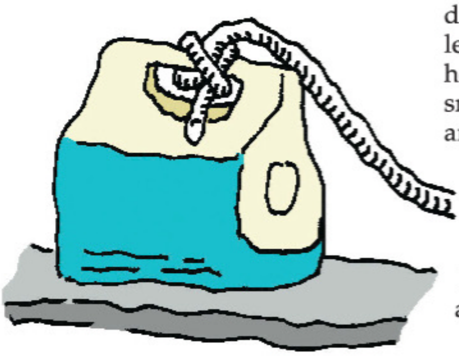
"Impressive," the kid said. "You upgraded the anchor rope, too?"

"On all the boats," Doc said. "I brought a couple hundred feet of new half-inch stuff. Used an anchor hitch knot to tie it to the eyes on the bows..."

"The pointy ends?"

"Right. And then tied on the concrete coffee-can anchors. Fifty feet of anchor rope should be enough in this lake."

"What's this?" I asked, pointing to the smaller rope that linked the handle of my Playmate drink cooler to the hole in an oar lock mount.



"A clove hitch," Doc said.

"We never tied our cooler down before," I said. "Why now?"

"For fun," Doc said with a grin.

We ran south along the shoreline, trolled rocky points and small bays with stands of new spring reeds. The pike we picked up were few but feisty, and didn't seem to be concentrated near any particular structure. All our knots performed as advertised.

Further along, a bubbling flow was rolling in from a dome of rock at the edge of a sparsely wooded area. From years past we recalled it as a trickle that aerated a veritable honey hole. This time the walleye bite was light, but frequent.

"I'm thinking it's near the end of the spawn," the attorney said, holding up a male walleye that was dripping milt.

"Why don't we try the faster water down by the narrows?" the banker said. "We always did well just out of the current."

The lake fed into a rock-lined ravine about 100 feet wide with a fairly sharp right turn before it rolled over a craggy rapids and waterfall into the next lake in the chain. Some years we were able to shoot the rapids and fish the pools below. But not this time.

Our three boats were in a line, separated by maybe 50 yards, when the policeman, piloting the lead boat, held up a hand to warn us that the flow was quickening at the top end of the narrows.

As the current pushed the stern, overpowering the little outboard, it was impossible for the policeman to keep the boat on a straight heading. Too close to the right shore to make a turn to the right, he goosed the throttle, swung the bow left across the flow, and did a full-power 180 to head back upstream. The momentum of the turn plus the current drove the boat to his right, or the far left side as we watched. Just when he was making headway, the prop smacked a rock, killing the engine, and smashing them into the shore.

The roaring flow kept the boat pinned against and onto the rocks with water sluicing over the side. The policeman instantly locked the dead engine on tilt, and he and the banker shifted to the right to slightly tip the boat and prevent it from taking on even more water. They weren't panicked yet, but the speed of the stranding was shocking.

Still safe above the bend, engines in reverse to maintain our positions, Doc and I and the attorney and the kid surveyed the situation.

After a long minute, Doc said, "The danger here is trying a rescue that gets all the boats in trouble. Even if we survive going over the falls, as high as the water is, I doubt the portage is usable, so there would be no way back."

"Can't we pull them into the current so they could start their engine?" the kid said.

"How would we get close enough?" the attorney said. "Look at the swirl right next to them. We get within 30 feet of that mess and we'll be trapped, too."

"I think I know how to do it," Doc said. "Cut the anchors loose." He sliced the anchor rope off our anchor and bow and tied it to a handle riveted onto the stern of our boat. Then he moved to our pointy end where he tied the 50-foot anchor rope from the kid's boat to our bow eye and the other end to their stern.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Making a chain of boats," Doc said. "They are hung up hard, so it will take the power of both engines to pull them off." He pointed to the kid's boat. "We connect to them with a 50-foot rope. We're in the middle, and connect to the beached boat with 100 feet of rope."

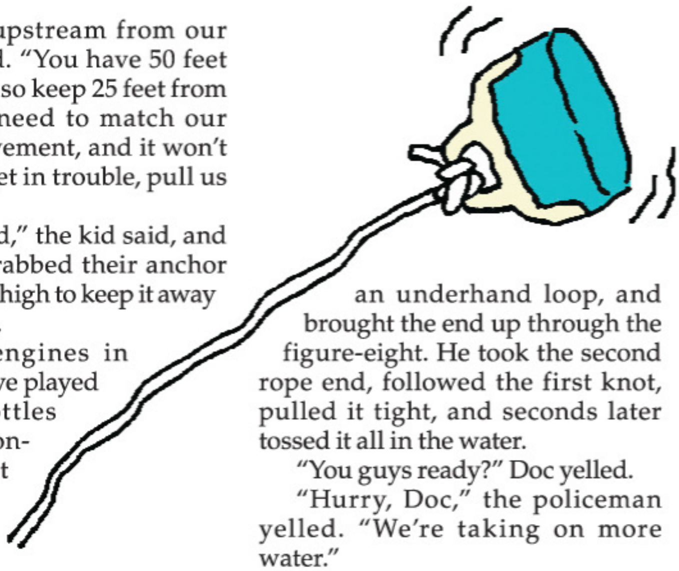
"But we only have 50," I said.

That's why we have to grab their anchor rope, but without getting too close," Doc said.

"How?"

Doc dug into his duffel, and from under his foul-weather gear extracted a 100-foot roll of quarter-inch poly. With flying fingers, he untied the clove hitch on the Playmate cooler, dumped our adult beverages in the bottom of the boat, and tied the small rope to the cooler handle. Doc said, "I'm gonna float the cooler to them with the rope attached. Might take a few tries." He handed me the end. "Hold on tight."

"What do I do?" the kid said.



"You stay upstream from our boat," Doc said. "You have 50 feet of anchor rope, so keep 25 feet from us, max. You need to match our speed and movement, and it won't be easy. If we get in trouble, pull us out of there."

"Understood," the kid said, and the attorney grabbed their anchor rope and held it high to keep it away from their prop.

With the engines in slow forward, we played with the throttles and let the monstrous current back us down the left center of the narrows, every now and then gunning the engines to keep our bows headed upstream.

When as close as he dared, Doc held the smaller coiled rope in his left hand, swung the cooler in his right, and tossed it as far as he could into the water above the policeman's beached boat. The current pushed it toward the shore, gradually nearer their boat. Amazingly on the first try, "Got it!" the banker yelled. "What now?"

Still a good 75 feet away, Doc yelled, "Cut the smaller rope off the cooler, then cut your anchor off, and join the two ropes together."

The banker uncoiled the half-inch rope Doc had installed that morning, and sliced off the coffee can anchor.

"How do I tie them?" the banker yelled?

"There won't be much strain, so just do a double granny," Doc yelled back.

The banker held the ends of the two different sized ropes together, and did what Doc said, tossed the ropes overboard.

I handed the smaller rope to Doc. He hauled it in as I carefully maneuvered to within 40 feet, the kid matching my every move.

Doc fished out the knotted ropes, untied them, and grabbed our stern-attached anchor rope to splice them together. He closed his eyes for a second, visualizing what he'd do next, and muttered, "Flemish bend." Then he made an overhand loop, an underhand loop, and brought the end up through the figure-eight. He took the second rope end, followed the first knot, pulled it tight, and seconds later tossed it all in the water.

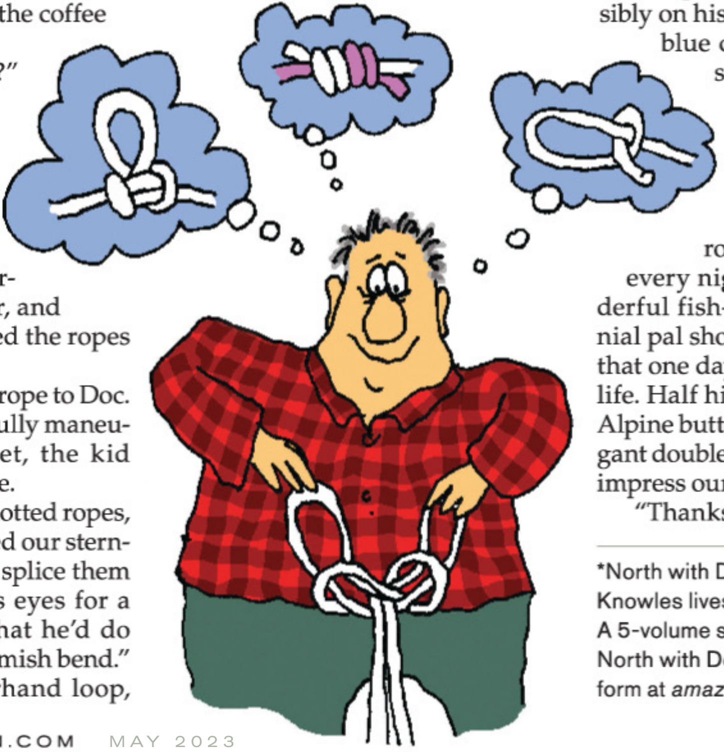
"You guys ready?" Doc yelled.

"Hurry, Doc," the policeman yelled. "We're taking on more water."

"Okay," Doc yelled. "We're gonna drag you off. As soon as your boat is free, lower and start your engine. Don't put it in gear until you are in the clear, or if the rope breaks or a knot comes loose. Don't run over any of the ropes. You got all that?"

"Let's do it," the policeman yelled.

The kid and I opened our throttles until we slowly took up the 50-foot slack between our two boats and the 100 feet between us and the beached boat. The tightened ropes sprung off the surface. Doc yelled, "Go! Go!" and we both revved to full power. The ropes strained and stretched, and the knots held.



The kid and I had to weave back and forth in the current to find the optimum position for maximum torque, but when we hit the sweet spot, the policeman's boat scraped free of the rocks, he fired up his engine, and we all made it to safe water and beyond. Easy peasy.

There was an island a quarter mile or so upstream with a sandy stretch on the calm east side, and we pulled in there.

Doc set about retying all the anchors, and I rescued the still chilled cans we'd dumped in the bottom of our boat, returning the ones not in use to the cooler.

The banker bailed gallons of water from their boat with a milk-jug urinal.

Then we sat there, catching our breaths, realizing we'd dodged a bullet.

The kid said, "I would've taken our boat alongside, and tried to pull them off with my hands. Or maybe even tried to tow them off somehow, but if our engine died, we'd be stuck, too."

"Or over the falls," the attorney said.

We thought about that for a while, and the banker said, "One boat engine wasn't enough."

"Or lighter rope and bad knots," I said.

The policeman choked a bit, possibly on his adult beverage, held his blue can high in a toast, and said, "We wouldn't have made it without you, Doc."

For obvious reasons, nobody wanted to return to the narrows. During cocktail hour every night the rest of that wonderful fish-filled week, our perennial pal showed us how to tie knots that one day we might use to save a life. Half hitches. Grapevine bends. Alpine butterflies. And even the elegant double loop Spanish bowline to impress our friends and neighbors.

"Thanks, Doc." ■

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*North with Doc columnist Greg Knowles lives in Green Valley, Arizona. A 5-volume set of the first 20 years of North with Doc is available in e-reader form at *amazon.com*.

(continued from page 88)

The fog was still hovering over the water but on occasion we could see down the lake. Having quickly picked up the one fish, we trolled a large circle around the mouth of the cove in hope that more were congregating below.

I had hardly put my line back in the water when the rod bent again. This time it was accompanied by a distant splash where the hooked fish jumped.

This trout fought mostly on the surface. I could predict where the jumps were coming by watching the line cut through the water. The lead line kept about the right tension for the jumping fish as it kept making a circle around the boat.

As this one came into the net, the pink stripe down its side shone bright even in the dull light. The rainbow was slightly smaller than the brown trout, but not much. I laid it in the cooler beside the brown.

A gentle ribbing seemed in order. So I offered Dad my lure, both of us knowing he wouldn't take it and I wouldn't give it. We always enjoyed this part of the trip and I think he took pride in my fish as much as his. He was grinning bigger than I was.

By now the sun was a dull orb visible through the fog. We could tell it would burn off soon so we were anxious to keep fishing.

Testing our luck, we made one more circle around the mouth of the cove. In the same area as the trout had struck, my rod doubled up one more time.

This fish fought differently than the first two. It splashed at the surface after the strike, but didn't clear the water. It pulled hard on a few runs, zigzagged a few times coming to the boat, and then rolled over to slide into the net. It was a largemouth just slightly smaller than the rainbow.

Catching each of these fish that morning was unusual because in early September the trout and bass usually found comfort in different depths. Whether we had found an underwater spring, an abundance of shad minnows, or some other reason for these fish to congregate, we never knew.

But as soon as our lines were back in the water, the fog burned off and with its disappearance the fish went with it. We tried to find the fish again but without success. The water looked like a mirror in the bright sunlight without a ripple or even another boat in sight.

After a couple more hours of trolling, we called it a morning. As soon as we got home, I grabbed a Polaroid camera and had Mom snap a photo of me with the brown trout. I planned to enter it in a *Sports Afield* fishing contest. As I recall, the minimum entry was two pounds and my brown weighed in at four even. I filled out the form, mailed it with the photo, and forgot about it.

Some months after the deadline for the competition, I started getting free fishing tackle in the mail. A fishing-line company sent some free line and a couple lure companies sent sample lures. I even got a few logo patches for my jacket. Then I got the certificate from *Sports Afield* telling me that I had registered the largest brown trout for the state.

The local newspaper sent a reporter to take my photo in the boat acting like I was fishing. I felt a little stupid reenacting the scene with the trees in the background. My classmates in school razzed me plenty over the story but it made me feel like a celebrity. I had bragging rights without even having to brag.

That certificate hangs on the wall of my cabin along with the Polaroid of me with my brown trout. Faded to shades of gray, the photo looks like the fog might be creeping into it.

I've not had a morning quite like that one since. I've fished foggy days on tailraces where the cool lake water during power generation leaves a layer of fog over the river. Sometimes at night on the lake, fog will drift in wisps by my lantern like old souls out for a stroll. But for a kid to land three nice fish that he remembers for a lifetime while the fog blocks everything else, that truly makes the trip unique.

Perhaps special mornings should never be repeated. That way, they remain special. ■

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*Jim Mize has caught larger trout since, but none that felt better. You can find his award-winning books on Amazon or purchase autographed copies at *acreektricklesthroughit.com*.

— In-Fisherman —
SOLUNAR CALENDAR

May

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	1 7:54A-9:54A 8:14P-10:14P	2 8:30A-10:30A 8:50P-10:50P	3 9:07A-11:07A 9:28P-11:28P	4 9:47A-11:47A 10:10P-12:10A	5 10:33A-12:33P 10:58P-12:58A	6 11:01A-1:01P 11:25A-1:25P
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28 5:59A-7:59A 6:19P-8:19P	29 6:37A-8:37A 6:57P-8:57P	30 7:13A-9:13A 7:34P-9:34P	31 7:51A-9:51A 8:13P-10:13P			

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Reflections

BY **JIM MIZE***

Fishing in Fog

The fog wasn't noticeable on the drive to the lake early that morning. Perhaps it was coming off the water or was just at the right elevation. But as we backed the boat down the ramp it seemed to fade.

Once on the water, our plan was to troll deep for trout. We both had lead lines on big reels; mine was a Penn saltwater reel and Dad's a large single-spool reel designed for lead lines. As we pulled away from the ramp, it became obvious we couldn't see well enough to drive up the lake so we dropped our lines as soon as we passed the no-wake buoy.

This late in the season, the shad minnows were full-grown so I tied on the largest Rebel minnow in my tackle box. Dad liked to troll spoons and usually did well with them.

He watched the flasher unit to keep us in deep water while I tried to listen for other boats. Any fool running at speed would be on top of us before he could see us. Even with our running lights on I still kept an ear out.

My line trailed behind the boat and I guessed my minnow was down about 30 feet. If you troll a lot you learn such things. I had five colors out on my lead line, and according to the charts for the line it tended to level out at that distance. Once earlier that year I snagged a tree top at that depth and positioned the boat directly above the snag. Then I measured 30 feet of line to the tree top just before it broke off. So it was an educated guess.

My fiberglass rod had a permanent bow in it from hours upon hours of trolling. Still, I preferred this rod because it had just the right pressure to set the hook on a bite when trolling. It also showed how my lure was running with the flexible tip. My Rebel was wobbling just enough to cause the tip to bob like a finger tapping a typewriter steadily on the same key.

We had trolled about a mile, trying to keep off the main channel but still in deep water. I could tell by the flasher unit we were crossing a cove and I guessed correctly that we were approaching Mize Point. I never knew why it had my last name but I thought it should be a lucky spot. It hadn't been up until that moment.

My rod bent double on the strike and I yelled at Dad to cut the motor. The fish shook its head and I let him get it out of his system. The last thing I needed was to bring a good fish to the side of the boat with too much fight left in it.

I kept a steady pressure on the fish, let it slog deep, and slowly brought it up. As it slid into the net, the spots jumped out at me. The brown trout had clearly lived well. Just under 20 inches, it had a deep belly and body disproportionate to its head. I gingerly placed the fish in the cooler and we went back to trolling.

(continued on page 87)

»The grin on the inside was bigger after a fine morning fishing in fog.

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